

**HOW A
REALIST
HERO**

REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

XVII





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— ♣ —
Maria Euphoria
— ♣ —

— ♣ —
Yuriga Haan
— ♣ —

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✠
Garurun
✠

✠
Tomoe Inui
✠

AT
GARURUN'S
BECKONING.
TOMOE WENT
OVER AND
KNELT IN
FRONT OF
HIM.





Juna Souma

The Prima Lorelei, with the greatest singing voice in the Kingdom of Friedonia. She is Souma's first secondary queen.



Roroa Amidonia

Princess of the former Principality of Amidonia. The third primary queen who also supports Souma with her rare economic sense.



Naden Delal Souma

Black ryuu girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Having formed a dragon knight contract with Souma, she is his second secondary queen.



Maria Euphoria

Former empress of the Gran Chaos Empire. Focuses her efforts on her charity work now that she is Souma's third secondary queen.



Yuriga Haan

Younger sister of Fuuga Haan, king of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. Came up with a plan that made her Souma's fourth primary queen.



HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM



Souma E. Friedonia

Young man summoned from another world. With the throne suddenly thrust upon him, he rules the Kingdom of Friedonia.



Liscia Elfrieden

Princess of the former Elfrieden Kingdom. Realizing Souma's talent, she resolves to support him as his first queen.



Aisha U. Elfrieden

Female dark elf warrior. Boasting the greatest martial ability in the kingdom, she is Souma's second primary queen and also his bodyguard.





Mutsumi Haan

Eldest daughter of the House of Chima, who ruled the Duchy of Chima. A wise and brave commander. Married Fuuga, and supports him on his path to supremacy.



Fuuga Haan

King of the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan. Defeated the Gran Chaos Empire and is now preparing to fully liberate the Demon Lord's Domain.



Ichiha Chima

Youngest son of the House of Chima, who ruled the Duchy of Chima. Has a gift for studying monsters, and has assumed Hakuya's duties to become acting prime minister.



Hashim Chima

Eldest son of the House of Chima, who ruled the Duchy of Chima. As Fuuga's advisor he is a cold, calculating wielder of cruel schemes.



Excel Walter

Commander-in-Chief of Friedonia's National Defense Force. This powerful woman is a member of the sea serpent race, and also a first-rate mage.



Tomoe Inui

Souma's adopted little sister. Has a gift that lets her understand monsters and demons. Graduated from the Royal Academy and now looks to become chamberlain.



Carla

Daughter of Castor. Was made a slave for the crime of treason and now works in Parnam Castle as a maid.



Castor

Former General of the Air Force in the Elfrieden Kingdom. Now attached to the Naval Defense Force as captain of the island-type carrier Hiryou.



Hakuya Euphoria

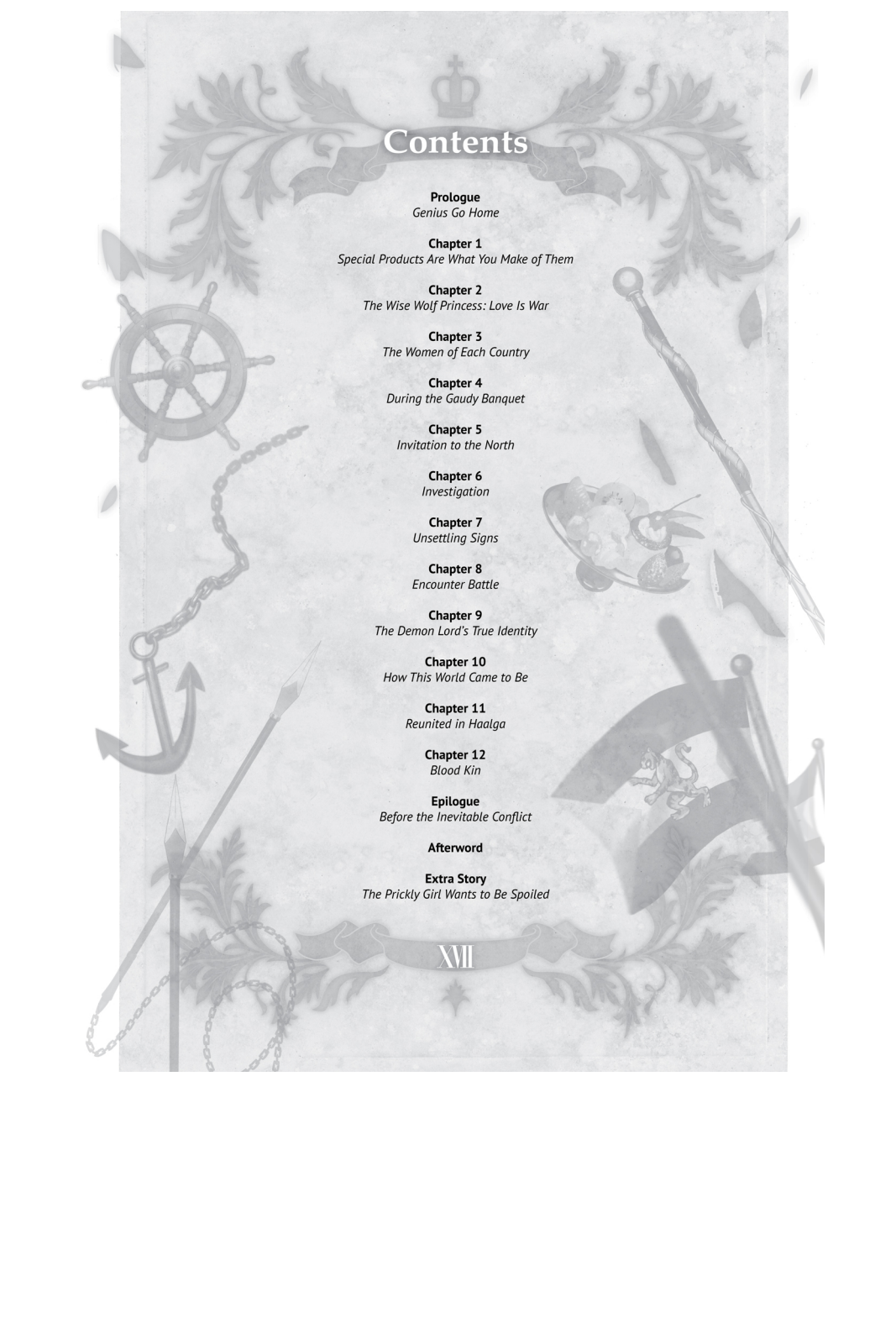
Friedonia's Black-Robed Prime Minister. Has chosen to become royal consort to Queen Jeanne of the Euphoria Kingdom.



Jeanne Euphoria

Younger sister of Maria, the former empress of the Gran Chaos Empire. Took the throne as queen of the Euphoria Kingdom after the Empire's fall.





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Prologue: Genius Go Home

Back before the war between the Gran Chaos Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom, in the room with Parnam Castle's broadcast jewel...

"Huh?! Don't come back?!" Empress Maria's little sister, Trill Euphoria, practically screamed.

This was because the person on the other side of the broadcast, her other sister, Jeanne, had insisted she not return to the country. Up until now, Trill had always been threatened with being dragged back to the Empire any time she caused trouble for her beloved Genia and Ludwin. Being told not to come back? This was a first.

The projection of Jeanne nodded solemnly.

"You heard me, Trill... The Great Tiger Kingdom has its sights set on our country. We expect a great war in the near future. I intend to risk my life to defend our sister, but...things could go awry. Stay in the Kingdom, under their protection."

"I couldn't! Perhaps there's nothing I can do to come back, but I detest the idea of staying here in safety while my sisters are fighting! Ah! I know! Let's turn to Sir Souma for help! I'm sure he would—"

"Trill!" Jeanne shouted. "We can't get *another* country caught up in our problems. Even you must know that."

"I still can't accept it! Did we not form an alliance with Friedonia precisely so that they could assist us in times like this?!" Trill asked, tears forming in her eyes. "Positions, duties, blood—none of that matters! Surviving is the most important thing! If all the country does is tie you two down, then let it be taken by those who want to have it!"

"Trill... I actually quite like the way you think," Jeanne said, smiling gently. "And because you're like that, I want you to live life to its fullest. I'm sure Sister would agree. This isn't about ensuring our bloodline's survival; it's because I want you to lead the life you want to lead. I want you to have the freedoms we didn't, okay?"

"You can't mean that!"

"Bye, now... Trill."

With that, the call was cut. The room's silence was deafening. Trill

stood there, dumbfounded for a time, but eventually, great tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“Wah... Waaaaahhhhhhh!”

Trill ran out of the room, bawling her eyes out. As she ran, not even wiping her eyes, she raced through the corridors of the castle to her carriage, which immediately carried her to the Maxwell-Arcs family’s dungeon workshop. Hours later, once she arrived, she found Genia inside the log house that had been built there and leapt into her arms.

“Huh? Tri— Blargh!”

“Big Sister Genia!!!”

Genia had no response. Trill’s flying tackle-hug had knocked her lights out. For a time, Trill continued violently shaking Genia. Eventually, Ludwin arrived—much too late—and pulled Trill off.

Thirty minutes later...

“I’m sorry, Big Sister, Lord Ludwin. I shouldn’t have let you see me acting like that.”

Finally settling down, Trill apologized to the two of them while drinking the tea that Ludwin had served. She’d cried her eyes out, and seemed dejected. The disconnect between this and her usual, cheerful self concerned Genia and Ludwin.

“Uh, right,” said Genia.

“So, what in the world happened?” asked Ludwin.

“Well, you see...”

Trill told them about the conversation she’d had with Jeanne. After listening, Genia didn’t know what to say to the despondent Trill. Ludwin, meanwhile, seemed to be thinking about something.

“I see... That explains why His Majesty...”

“Lord Ludwin?”

“Ah! Oh, it’s nothing, Madam Trill,” Ludwin said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “This may sound like an empty reassurance, but...I’m sure Madam Maria and Madam Jeanne will both be fine. There are plenty of people who want to help them.”

“Ah! I-Is this country already doing something?!”

Were they moving to save Maria? Trill had been about to ask, but Ludwin raised a hand to stop her.

“Any knowledge I have is confidential, so there is nothing I can say.”

“I... I see.”

“However, I will do everything in my power to ensure that it does not end in a result that would make you cry. I’ll be away from the house for some time, so you’re welcome to stay here in my absence,” Ludwin said before rising to his feet. “Genia.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I’m heading to the castle now. I won’t be back for some time. Look after the house and Madam Trill while I’m gone.”

“Sure. Do your best out there, Big Brother Luu.”

Ludwin made a dramatic exit as his petite wife saw him off. Trill shed tears of gratitude as she watched him go, now confident there were people who would fight for her sisters.



Now, we return to the present. Some time after the Gran Chaos Empire and Great Tiger Kingdom had fought their war...

“So, why are you still here?” Genia said, puffing up her cheeks.

“Because I want to be with you, of course, Big Sister,” Trill replied, unfazed.

With the war over and Maria and Jeanne both confirmed safe, Ludwin returned home, and the Gran Chaos Empire was reorganized to become the Euphoria Kingdom, but Trill was still staying in Genia’s house. Up until she knew for sure that Maria and Jeanne were safe, Trill had acted meek and timid, but now, she was already back to her old shenanigans.

“Sir Ludwin told me to stay in this house.”

“It was only as long as he was away, right?”

“Oh, my. Was it?” Trill put her arm through the loop Genia was making with hers and leaned in to touch their cheeks together. “Hee hee, Big Sister~♪”

“Enough. Big Brother Luu, help me.”

“Give it a rest, Madam Trill.”

As Ludwin was watching the two of them, a wry smile on his face... There was a sudden knock at the door to the log house.

“A guest?” Genia said, cocking her head to the side.

About the only people who visited them down here were Merula, Trill’s research buddies, or the members of Souma’s family. And if it was Souma’s family, they’d have been notified in advance.

“Hm? Yes, come in.”

“Excuse me.”

The door opened to reveal a beautiful woman. It was Maria Euphoria, former empress and future third secondary queen, who had chopped her blonde hair short. Trill let go of Genia’s arm as her eyes widened in surprise.

“Big Sister Maria?! What brings you here?”

“I heard I could find you here.”

Maria walked over, a smile on her face, and came to a stop in front of her sister. Trill’s face twitched as she got a vaguely bad feeling about that smile.

The corners of Maria's mouth turned up even further. "Now then, Trill."

"Wh-Whatever could it be, Big Sister Maria?"

"It's time to go home!" Maria told her, sounding like a town loudspeaker in the evening.

Trill blinked. "Erm... By that, do you mean...to my house in Parnam?"

"No. To Valois, the city of your birth."

"The Imperial capital?!"

"We're a kingdom now, so it's the royal capital."

Maria was ordering her to return to the Euphoria Kingdom.

"The joint research project to create a drill has produced results, and your fellow researcher, Taru, has returned home as well. It is about time you went back to Valois. We need someone to teach people in the Euphoria Kingdom to use the newly developed technologies."

"That's not fair...! Ah! I know! I have my duties as ambassador to the Kingdom to attend to..."

"I'll be taking over that job." Maria cut down any further arguments before Trill could make them. "We've adopted what's effectively a 'two countries, one nation' arrangement. I can act as a bridge between them."

"Uh, but aren't you busy, Big Sister Maria?"

"When I am away, Sir Ginger's wife, Madam Sandria, will fill in for me. She originally came from the Empire, and she still has family in the Euphoria Kingdom."

It looked like there was no escape. Maria had run the Empire for a long time, after all. Trill was never going to be able to beat her in an argument like this. As she fell silent, at a loss for words, Maria took her hand with a gentle smile.

"Big Sister Maria?"

"Come along, Trill. It's time for your triumphant return. You'll be supporting Jeanne from now on."

"N-No fair! Big Sisteeer!"

Trill desperately reached out to Genia for help, but...

"Yes, yes, your big sister's right *here*. And you have another one in Valois," Maria said, pulling her along by the hand as she left Genia's house.

The Euphoria sisters came suddenly, and left the same way. Genia and Ludwin watched, dumbfounded, as it all went down.

"I don't know what to say... It's like a storm just finished blowing through," Ludwin murmured once silence returned.

Genia smiled wryly at that wording. "It sure is. But now..."

"Genia?"

Genia pressed herself against Ludwin's arm. Due to her small

stature compared to his, she had to use her whole body to wrap herself around his arm.

“Heh-heh, now the two of us can finally enjoy some alone time.”

“Uh... Y-Yeah, I guess so, huh?”

The handsome second-in-command of the National Defense Force nodded, turning a bright shade of red.



Chapter 1: Special Products Are What You Make of Them

During the war between the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan and the Gran Chaos Empire, the Republic of Turgis, a nation on the southernmost tip of the continent, had taken advantage of the confusion. They invaded Mercenary State Zem, an ally of the Great Tiger Kingdom, and took three cities that were near their own borders.

That said, though the cities were taken by force, most of Zem's mercenaries had been away fighting alongside the Great Tiger Kingdom—spreading their defenses thin. The Republic had even more forces gathered for the push north waiting in nearby cities. As a result, the Republic didn't face much in the way of resistance.

When the war ended, they returned just the northernmost of those three cities, the one that was vital to Zem's defense, while the other two were incorporated into the Republic's territory. This happened due to three main reasons. The first being, after essentially declaring victory, Fuuga wanted to focus on stabilizing his newly expanded land—not deal with the problems of his vassal states. The second being due to the Head of the Republic, Kuu Taisei's, stubborn negotiating. And lastly, because Souma had been dragged out to mediate as leader of the Maritime Alliance.

"Ookyakya! We finally managed to go north, huh!" Kuu said, smiling as he surveyed his new cities from a distance. "It's bold of Fuuga Haan to have us give back just one city and let us keep the rest."

"Maybe he thinks it's fine to give them to you for now since you won't be able to hold them anyway?" Nike Chima, who was standing beside him, suggested with a shrug.

This young, capable commander who wielded a spear was Kuu's friend and confidante.

"I'll bet," Kuu said with a wry smile. "Anyone who knew the history of the Republic would think that. We've taken cities in an attempt to expand north before, but we've always had to abandon them in the end."

The Republic was unmatched in winter combat where the power of air forces such as wyverns was suppressed. But because their cold climate prohibited them from raising wyverns, they had no air force of their own. When things warmed up, and the enemy was able to send out their wyverns, the Republic inevitably ended up on the back foot. Furthermore, the Republic was locked in snow and ice during the middle of winter, shutting down communication between the homeland and the cities they'd taken. That's why it was so hard to hold their conquests.

Fuuga must have known that too. He figured that even if he stopped negotiating with the return of just one city, he could take the rest back later anyway.

Kuu smiled daringly. "Ookyakya! But that's how the Republic was *before*. Let's show him that that reasoning won't apply to the Republic we're going to create."

Nike's eyes widened at this confident declaration. "Feeling rather sure of yourself, I see. Do you have any reason to think we can win?"

"Hah! I've learned a thing or two from watching my bro Souma rule. I've studied up on how to win the hearts and minds of the people in the territory under our control."

"Are you talking about the way Sir Souma annexed Amidonia?" Kuu's second wife Leporina asked, tilting her head slightly. She was standing opposite Nike, and was also here as Kuu's bodyguard, so her bunny ears were twitching with alertness. "He broadcast a music program, right? Are you going to do that, Master Kuu?"

"Ookyakya! Not quite. Providing broadcast programs for entertainment is just one method, but the essence of winning people over is deeper, simpler than that."

"It's...simple?"

"Yeah. To sum it up real quick—it's about presenting them something new."

After saying that, Kuu gestured towards what was in front of them with his chin. There were dozens of people from the two cities and their outlying areas gathered there. They were wealthy farmers, big merchants, and ex-mercenaries who'd retired to life as lords—those with power, basically. They had been called here in Kuu's name today and were now trembling, surrounded by soldiers of the Republic.

Currently, they were all gathered at the foot of a mountain. These influential figures were all worried that they might be massacred here, and their bodies discarded in the mountains, as to prevent them from interfering with his rule. No one had explained to them the reason for gathering, so you could hardly blame them for thinking that.

As he looked at these men, Kuu said to Leporina, "These guys are like how the Republic used to be. They have a sense of values they've

built over time, and the traditions they've cultivated make it hard for them to accept things that come from outside. If someone's got their fingers in their ears, no amount of honeyed words will persuade them. You've gotta pull those fingers out first. It's necessary to create a moment of vulnerability."

"And that's what presenting them with something new does?" Nike asked.

"Yeah," Kuu replied with a nod. "When people see something they hadn't imagined, the surprise leaves their hearts vulnerable. It brushes away all their established traditions and values for a moment. If you can just use that opening to present them with something tempting, they're bound to accept how incredible it is."

Kuu clapped his hands. The sound gathered all eyes on him.

"Bro used broadcast programs for it, but this is what I'll use." Kuu raised up his cudgel, turning just his head. "Do it, Taru!"

With that, he swung his cudgel down.

Bang! There was the sound of an explosion in the mountains, then...

Rumble, rumble, rumble! The ground shook, and the birds in the mountains took to the skies.

"Is this an earthquake?!"

"Don't tell me it's a landslide!"

"Sh-Shouldn't we run?!"

The assembled crowd looked on in confusion, but Kuu was resolutely calm as he told them, "There's nothing to worry about! I've got something I want to show you."

Next, he pointed to the rocky face of the mountain with his cudgel.

Grind, grind, grind... The rock face collapsed before their eyes, revealing a massive cylindrical machine. This machine, chewing through rock and dirt alike, was the product of the Republic of Turgis, Kingdom of Friedonia, and Gran Chaos Empire's joint research project: the drill.



For the past two years, Kuu had been building his own drill for boring tunnels. Then, after he'd decided to take Zem's cities, he began slowly tunneling through the mountains along their border.

"The hole behind that machine goes all the way to the heart of the Republic!" Kuu told the power brokers assembled before him. "Up until now, whenever the Republic seized land outside the Turgis Region, we struggled to hold it when winter snow made communication difficult. But with this tunnel, traveling back and forth will be much easier. Once you're inside the Republic, we have a lot of mounts that can handle the snow. The supply of goods to this area should become much better... Ookyakya! Like *this*!"

With that, a group of people riding numoths and snow yaks with baskets began emerging from the tunnel. It was a merchant caravan from the Republic of Turgis.

Kuu had them lay out the things they had brought for the people of Zem to see. Their eyes widened when they saw what the baskets contained—fresh fish. There were shellfish too, and they were still alive.

"Now, take a gander. We've got fresh seafood, caught in Turgis's ports today. You're a bunch of inlanders, so you probably don't get fresh fish often. I've been putting effort into my logistics, just like the Kingdom of Friedonia," Kuu boasted. He took a bottle of alcohol from his first wife, Taru, the Republic's top technologist, who had rejoined them after directing the drill team. He held it up for the crowd to see. "Now, let's drink and eat fish! We can save the boring talk for later!"

The crowd roared with applause at this declaration. They'd figured they were going to be murdered and buried. But they weren't just being allowed to live—they were being shown this newfangled drilling machine, treated to fresh seafood, and even drinks to go with it. The release from fear combined with this excitement dulled their decision-making ability. No one here thought of Kuu and his people as invaders anymore. These influential figures had fallen for his scheme.

"Okay, everyone! Let's go all out, partying and stuffing our faces today! Cheers!"

""Cheers! To Lord Kuu and the Republic!""

As the curtain of night began to fall, a big banquet was held between the Republic's military and the influential figures of the former Zemish cities, along with their families. They put a simple curtain over the front of the tunnel and laid out the food and drinks brought from the Republic behind it to create a space for the occasion. Kuu was in the center of the party, speaking about the future with a glass of wine in one hand.

“From now on, you’re people of the Republic too! We’ll be bringing more and more seafood through this tunnel! But that’s not all! This warm land will become an important bridge between the Republic of Turgis, the Kingdom of Friedonia, and the Gran Chaos—er, wait, they’re the Euphoria Kingdom now, aren’t they? Well, it’ll be an important bridge between the three countries! People and goods will gather, which means you can count on a lot of development!”

“““Yeahhhh!”””

“The continent is now divided between the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Kingdom. Even if Fuuga comes knocking, we don’t have to worry! Does he have an awesome machine that can pierce through these mountains? No! Only the countries of the Maritime Alliance do! If Fuuga attacks, we’ll come through this tunnel to rush to the rescue!”

“Wow! You’re so cool, Lord Kuu!”

“Ookyakya! Thanks!”

As Kuu waved to the clapping drunk, a round of applause erupted. Taru, Leporina, and Nike watched him from a short distance away, eating and drinking themselves.

“Here, Nike. It’s hot wine.”

“Oh, thanks.” Nike gave a polite bow to Leporina as she poured him a drink.

Though he drank it for warmth, he never let go of his spear. If anyone tried to harm Kuu, he was going to be ready to run them through at any moment.

As he kept watching Kuu, Nike whispered, “He looks like he’s getting drunk and rowdy, but he’s actually sober, isn’t he?”

“Of course,” Taru responded. “The milk Master Kuu’s drinking isn’t fermented, it’s just normal milk.”

“He’s acting like he’s let his guard down in order to get them to open up to him, but he hasn’t relaxed his guard at all,” Leporina explained. “He’s willing to put on a goofy act in order to win their hearts. It shows you he’s operating on another level.”

Taru nodded. “As a ruler, he gets full marks. As a husband, I have to take off five marks.”

“Hm? Why is that?” Leporina asked, but Taru looked away peevishly.

“He’s all caught up in his work, leaving his two cute wives alone.”

“Ah ha ha... You have a point there. By the way, how many points is a full score?”

“One hundred.”

“Even after you mark him down, he’s still scoring ninety-five? You’re head over heels, aren’t you?”

You could tell from the way his wives were talking that they

understood. Kuu was still fighting. And he was confident he would win.

Sensing the trust between the three of them, Nike thought, *Watching them makes me want a wife of my own...*



Meanwhile, in the Kingdom of Friedonia, Souma was so busy with work he thought it might kill him.

This was nothing new, but the amount of work being brought in to him recently was on the rise. That's because, with Maria retiring from her role as empress and marrying Souma, Hakuya the Black-Robed Prime Minister had gone to marry the new queen, Jeanne. The adoption of a system of "two countries, one nation" in the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom was necessitating many changes.

So, once again today, Souma was working alongside his wife, Liscia. It was around the time it began to get dark outside.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty."

Ichiha, who was serving as acting prime minister while Hakuya was in the Euphoria Kingdom, came in.

"Ichiha? What's up?" Souma asked, and Ichiha stood tall as he gave his report.

"Sir Poncho has returned. He is waiting in your family's personal dining hall, sire."

Ichiha was doing a good job maintaining his composure with the eyes of the royal couple and their bureaucrats on him. You could tell he was Hakuya's successor. He'd really settled into his role as acting prime minister.

Souma nodded and stopped doing paperwork. "Let's take a break. Will you come too, Liscia?"

"Yeah. It sounds like there might be something interesting."

Liscia, who seemed to know where Poncho had been sent, smiled peacefully as she set a bundle of papers down on the desk. It produced a heavy *thunk*, making Souma grimace.

There's still that much left...? Well, it can wait. Souma shook his head, changing gears, and then left the office with Liscia and Ichiha to go see Poncho.

When they reached the dining hall, Poncho had already laid the fruits of his trip out on a long, wide table. Noticing Souma and the others, he bowed repeatedly.

"Wh-Why, Your Majesties. It's a pleasure to see the two of you. I, Poncho Ishizuka Panacotta, have returned, yes."

"Thank you for your trouble, Poncho."

As Souma thanked the man, Liscia looked at him, a little confused.

"Hm? Sir Poncho... Have you lost weight again?"

“Now that you mention it, he has...” Souma agreed, nodding.

It wasn't like the sudden, intense weight loss he'd gone through before, but he'd lost his usual roundness of form.

Poncho smiled awkwardly, scratching his cheek. “Um... Miss Serina and Miss Komain want ‘another,’ you see... Yes.”

““Ah...”” Souma and Liscia instantly understood. This had happened before. He must have been putting in a lot of effort, late at night with his two wives.

Ichiha, who was beside them, listening in, turned a bright shade of red as he figured it out too.

“That's, uh...more than I needed to know,” he said.

“No, no, you're at the age where you need to start thinking about that kind of thing too, you know?”

“D-Do you think so?”

“Well, we can leave that talk for later. This is more important.”

Souma clapped his hands as he tried to move things along from this awkward topic. “So, how was the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan?”

“Oh, yes. To think I could go to the Spirit Kingdom, take care of my mission, and return within a week. It's an incredible time to be alive, yes,” Poncho said with a wry smile.

Liscia looked at Souma. “You put in a request with the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, right?”

“Yeah, I did. I asked Queen Sill to send dragon knights to drop off Poncho and pick him back up. Man, their transition from being the Dragon Knight Kingdom to a ‘courier kingdom’ sure is convenient. They can handle the sort of high-speed, long-distance shipping that only Naden and Ruby could do for us before, allowing us to move men and supplies around freely.”

It was especially tempting as a means of moving retainers around. If he wanted to, Souma could bring Hakuya back from the Euphoria Kingdom in about a day, and it was also easy to send people and supplies there from the Kingdom of Friedonia.

“They're currently limiting their services to requests we submit as a nation, but with the advance of globalization, the Dragon Knight Kingdom will become indispensable to the world.”

“They're turning into an incredible country... Queen Sill must be working hard too,” Liscia said, sounding impressed.

Next, Poncho pointed to the stuff laid out on the table. “As requested, I have brought back samples of potential trade goods from the Spirit Kingdom, yes. King Garula is taking a positive view of trade with our country.”

Souma had sent Poncho to the Spirit Kingdom in order to investigate what trade goods they had. The independent government on the Father Island was the only part of the Spirit Kingdom beholden

to Fuuga. The Mother Island still maintained its independence from him.

During the Spirit King's Curse Incident (or Magic Bug Disease Incident), the high elves of the Mother Island learned there were some problems they couldn't tackle alone. Unable to remain as they were, they became more open to trade. The Spirit Kingdom was now opening to the outside world. They were trading with Fuuga's Great Tiger Kingdom, using Princess Elulu, who was the representative of the independent government on the Father Island, as a mediator, and also wanted to trade with the Maritime Alliance.

However, while the Kingdom of Friedonia had many things to offer, such as medical goods and foodstuffs, Souma wondered if the Spirit Kingdom had any alluring goods of their own. If trade was one-sided, it risked being seen as economic exploitation. In order to prevent friction, the Spirit Kingdom needed to have some star products of their own. As a professional gourmet, Poncho was sent to investigate just that.

Well-traveled as he was, even Poncho couldn't have entered the Spirit Kingdom back when it was closed to the outside world, so he'd been interested in their local cuisine.

Poncho smiled broadly as he picked up the box he'd brought back with him.

"Oh, the Spirit Kingdom's cuisine really was fascinating, yes. I thought they might live exclusively off the bounty of the forest, like the dark elves of the God-Protected Forest, but it seems they'll eat just about anything. The hot, humid climate has given bloom to a food culture that uses spices to make up for the difficulty in preserving food, yes."

"Spices, huh? Come to think of it, I remember Merula mentioning that." Something about them growing the sort of spices that might be used to make curry powder.

"That's right, yes," Poncho said, nodding with glee. "There were many spices I haven't seen on the continent, and I think they will make wonderful trade goods, yes. I've brought a number back with me, so I'm looking forward to seeing how I can use them in my own cooking. Ah... I think I'll try chicken first. I wonder how it will taste marinated in each of them..."

Poncho had a silly grin on his face, no doubt imagining all the different dishes he was going to make. Seeing him like that made the others present feel hungry. Especially Souma, who still had vibrant memories of the curry from his old world.

The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago had seasonings the continent didn't, so here's hoping I can combine them to make something like Japanese-style curry. That would expand our repertoire of dishes,

and...more importantly, I want to eat some curry. I haven't had it in years... Sigh...

"Souma, you're drooling..." Liscia warned him.

"Whoops," Souma said, wiping his mouth. "So, did they have anything other than spices?"

"Oh, yes. There were a number of crops I wasn't familiar with, but the one that caught my attention was 'bean tea.' It is also drunk in a number of places on the continent, but there's not much supply. Yet, it seemed the Spirit Kingdom could grow it in abundance."

"Bean tea?" Souma asked.

"This is it, yes."

Poncho handed Souma a bottle filled with brown beans. *Hold on, are these...* he thought before opening the bottle to take a sniff of them. *Yeah, they definitely are.*

"Is this coffee? Oh...I see. You guys call it bean tea, huh?"

"As you say, sire, this is a variety of coffee, yes."

"Aw, yeah!"

Souma pumped his arm enthusiastically, earning him a blank look from Liscia.

"You had coffee at Genia's place before, didn't you? Is this anything to be so happy about?"

"Well, it's partially because I'm more of a coffee person than a tea drinker, but it's apparently more of a northern specialty, not something we have a large supply of. I think Genia got hers from the northern refugees too. That makes it more of a luxury than something people can drink regularly."

"Yeah. That sounds about right," Liscia said, nodding. That was how people saw it in this country.

Souma picked up a bean and sniffed it. "The caffeine in this bean will wake you right up. I imagine people drinking it when working late or staying up to study."

"I see why you'd need it then, Souma..."

Working in the palace was a battle of perseverance. For Souma, he was working at home, and yet still had to do a lot of overtime and all-nighters. It wasn't as bad as just after he was first summoned, but it still cut into his sleep time. Souma had been compensating by drinking some well-steeped tea up until now, but if he could drink coffee on a daily basis, the bean would be a powerful ally.

"Oh, this is good. If we can trade for large quantities, I'll send some to Hakuya, since his workload is killing him too... I'd like to import a large amount of both the coffee and the spices all at once."

"I think the Spirit Kingdom will be glad to hear that, yes."

"Ah... But spices and coffee are both cash crops..." Souma said, scratching his head. Liscia clapped her hands together.

“*Ohh*. Like what caused our food crisis.”

It looked like she remembered.

“If you grow too many cash crops for export, that lowers your food self-sufficiency rate, and adverse events can result in a food crisis. You can use the money to import food crops from elsewhere, but it’s not good to rely on that too much... I guess we’ll have to talk it over with King Garula and see if we can find a healthy balance... Well, there’s something else to do first.”

“Hm?”

“Since we’ve got some here already, why don’t we all try it?”

Souma decided to make coffee for his friends and family right away.

The result was that Juna and Roroa liked it, while Aisha and Naden were not fans. Liscia and Maria were somewhere in the middle. (They could drink it with milk and sugar.) Surprisingly, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga all liked it. They said that if it became more widely available, they’d want to introduce it to Lucy’s family’s parlor. It wouldn’t be long before there were coffee-flavored sweets.

As Souma watched all of them react, he thought, *We’ve found a reliable ally in a surprising place*, and sipped a cup of coffee with milk in it.



Chapter 2: The Wise Wolf Princess: Love Is War

Recently, in Parnam, Souma has been rapidly preparing for the second marriage ceremony of his lifetime—to Maria and Yuriga, of course.

The king of a rising power in the east was marrying the former empress of the fallen great power of the west, and also Princess Yuriga, who came from the Great Tiger Kingdom as an exchange student. There wasn't a person in the Kingdom of Friedonia who wasn't excited.

That day would also see the Black-Robed Prime Minister, who was the pride of the Kingdom of Friedonia, married to Queen Jeanne, the new sovereign of the Euphoria Kingdom. This one would be taking place in the Euphoria Kingdom, but the people were excited that the Black-Robed Prime Minister would become royal consort there. That is, everyone except for all the women who had secretly been gunning for him themselves.

There was a festive mood in Parnam right now that was as great, if not greater, than the one that'd greeted Souma's marriage to Liscia and the other queens.

And just as back then, Souma had put out a call to his retainers who were looking to get married so that there could be weddings held all around the city at the same time. Two of the big names that came forward were Mio Carmine, daughter of Georg Carmine, whose name had been cleared of the black mark of treason, and Colbert, the minister of finance.

This conversation happened the other day, in the Carmine Domain...

"Congratulations, Colbert. You're finally getting a wife too, are you?"

It was after the wedding was made public. Julius had come to the Carmine Domain with his wife Tia to congratulate his old friend.

With a wry smile, Colbert said, "Thanks, Julius. Technically, I'm the one marrying into her family though."

"Oh, I see... You're taking her name, then. I won't be able to call

you Colbert anymore.”

Colbert’s full name was Gatsby Colbert, but Colbert was easier to say than Gatsby, so Julius and Roroa always called him by his family name. This had been adopted by others, and his family name started getting treated like it was his first name. However, once he married into the House of Carmine, his name would become Gatsby Carmine.

“I don’t see a problem with it. He can still be Colbert,” Mio said as she entered the room holding Julius and Tia’s child, Tius. Tia was behind her, smiling.

Mio put Tius back in Tia’s arms, then put a hand on Colbert’s shoulder. “You’ll always be Sir Bee, Sir Bee. No matter what anyone else calls you, that’s never going to change.”

“Madam Mio...”

“And if it bothers you, you could ask His Majesty and Lady Roroa to let you keep Colbert as a middle name. Gatsby C. Carmine.”

“No, no, Madam Mio, I couldn’t... Deliberately keeping my family name when there’s no political reason for it, like the Maxwells had...”

“Hmm... That could be good, actually.”

“Julius?!” Colbert’s eyes went wide.

Julius laughed. “Roroa would be sad if she couldn’t call you Colbert anymore. I think I’ll put in the request myself when I visit the castle tomorrow.”

Colbert was stunned.

And so, the proposal to keep Colbert as his middle name went through with surprising ease. It worked out perfectly for Souma, who would get confused if he had to start calling him Gatsby or Carmine instead.

While these preparations for weddings around the capital continued, there were others who were quietly preparing for a wedding of their own. One such couple was Tomoko, the Wise Wolf Princess Tomoe’s birth mother, and Inugami, the vice commander of the Black Cats.

Inugami was deeply involved with the Inui family due to his job as Tomoe’s bodyguard, and her little brother Rou was completely convinced that Inugami must be his dad because he had no recollection of his own father. Inugami and Tomoko also seemed to share a mutual affection for one another, so those around them had pushed them to finally tie the knot. However, as Inugami was a member of a clandestine organization, and this was Tomoko’s second marriage, they didn’t want to make a big deal of the event.

“Then let’s do it while all those other weddings are happening,” was Tomoe’s idea, and the reason the couple decided to do it during the mass wedding event.

Having reached the age where she was thinking about marriage herself, Tomoe wanted to see her birth mother find happiness.



“You’re...okay with that, Tomoe?” Ichiha asked after hearing about it from Tomoe.

Tomoe gave him a blank look in return. “Okay with what?”

“Having Mr. Inugami as your father. I thought you might feel conflicted.”

“Hmm... Not at this point, no?” Tomoe cocked her head to the side at the look of concern Ichiha was giving her. “I mean, I’ve already got a lot of family who aren’t blood-related to me.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

Tomoe’s family included her birth mother, Tomoko; her blood brother, Rou; her adoptive parents, Albert and Elisha; her adopted sister, Liscia; and her brother-in-law, Souma.

On top of that, all of Souma’s wives treated her like a little sister. Adding Inugami to the mix as a stepfather wasn’t going to make much difference at this point.

Tomoe pressed her hand to her cheek and sighed. “Besides, I think Mr. Inugami is a good choice. He’s looked after me all this time as my bodyguard, so if he makes Mom happy, then that’s what matters.”

“I guess it is, yeah.”

“But I can’t spend all my time fretting over the two of them,” Tomoe said, taking a big sip of fruit juice through her straw.

Ichiha and Tomoe were visiting the fruit parlor run by Lucy’s family, the Evans Company, together. In short, this was a date.

Fed up at the lack of progress in their relationship, despite their obvious mutual attraction, their friends had started forcing them to go places alone together more often. And yet, not much had changed between them.

Silence overcame the table.

This was because Ichiha just wouldn’t make the first move. He had incredibly low self-esteem after spending most of his life in the Duchy of Chima being bullied by people who couldn’t recognize his gifts. He was aware of Tomoe’s affection for him, and his for her, but struggled to see himself as worthy of her princessly status.

However, after coming to this country, Ichiha’s talent blossomed, and people recognized that. Those closest to Souma thought there was no one else who would be a suitable partner for Princess Tomoe. Meanwhile, the people who didn’t know any better largely assumed they were already engaged. All the groundwork had been laid for him, and all Ichiha needed to do was press the attack and seize the fortress that was Tomoe for himself. Tomoe was even waiting for him with the

gate bar removed.

The only thing keeping them in limbo was Ichiha's introverted personality.

Ugh! This is going nowhere...! she thought.

That was why Tomoe had decided to try something today. She was going to make Ichiha take the first step, and the only one he would need in order to bring him across the finish line. Even if it took using the feminine wiles she'd learned from First Secondary Princess Juna for this day. Yes, the Wise Wolf Princess wanted to make him confess his love to her.

"You know, Yuriga's going to be getting married too."



Tomoe started jabbing in the general direction of the subject.

“Well, they’ll be getting married, but they’re not going to be trying for a baby for a little while. Yuriga wants to keep playing mage soccer for now.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I know because I’m going to be the chamberlain.”

It had been decided Tomoe would be taking over Marx’s role in managing palace events and managing the health of the royal family. One of those duties was managing their nightly schedules to ensure the propagation of the royal bloodline. That meant their family planning was handled by Tomoe, and she’d been using that to poke fun at Yuriga lately. It was adorable the way Yuriga turned beet-red and got angry.

Tomoe chuckled to herself as she remembered Yuriga’s face.

“Big Brother and the others want to respect Yuriga’s decision,” she said.

“I see. Well, they already have Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha as heirs. When you consider our relationship with the Great Tiger Kingdom, it’s probably best not to rush things.”

“Yeah. So...I may be the problem. There’s been a lot of marriage offers for me lately.” Tomoe went and threw a straight punch at the matter. “Maybe a lot of people are being *influenced* by this mass marriage? I’ve been getting a lot of requests from knightly and noble families... It’s a real nuisance, you know?”

Tomoe let out a belabored sigh, but...it was all a lie.

Souma had made some moves behind the scenes, quietly shutting down any offers for the Wise Wolf Princess’s hand before they could happen.

By stressing that she already had someone in mind and bringing Liscia and the other queens, who were always delighted to hear about their little sister’s love life, on board, he had managed to kill any attempts to say, “It would look bad if she were to refuse outright, so could we just have the two of them meet?”

In short, there were no offers to marry Tomoe right *now*. It was a total bluff! Tomoe was simply scheming to make Ichiha feel it was urgent that he propose to her himself! This was what the Wise Wolf Princess could do when she got serious!

Now, as for Ichiha...

“Yeah, go figure. I get a mountain of those requests too.”

“...”

He was serious. Once his talents were discovered, Ichiha had become famous throughout the country. It had also been decided he would act as prime minister while Hakuya was out of the country.

There were few better people to marry for wealth and power, so all the upper-class families with daughters of marriageable age were plotting to arrange a marriage with Ichiha. And having come from another country, Ichiha didn't have the kind of strong backers that Tomoe did. It was hard for him to reject the meetings. While he was at the Royal Academy, and Tomoe was by his side, the houses had restrained themselves, thinking it best not to anger the king's little sister.

However, now that he had graduated, they didn't see the need to hold back anymore. Many of them thought that even if he was going to get engaged to Tomoe at some point, they should get in there first, build a connection, and have him choose their daughters as his second or third wife.

Tomoe understood that too. She had been trying to put pressure on Ichiha, but instead, she unknowingly piled more pressure on herself. What a natural womanizer! Ichiha Chima!

But Tomoe wasn't one to be deterred.

"Then I think you should get yourself some proper backers. If you had a fiancée with powerful people behind her, that would dissuade the others from making offers. Might I suggest someone with ties to the royal family?"

A blatant appeal to pick her!

Tomoe was King Souma's honorary little sister. Who could have a more powerful backer than her? If he would just get engaged to her, he could get rid of all those bothersome other offers.

So, propose to me, she was saying.

Tomoe gave Ichiha a meaningful gesture, but...

"Hmm... But wouldn't it be rude to the lady I proposed to if I was only doing it to fend off other suitors?"

Ichiha unbelievably missed this blatant move due to his sincerity! What he was saying was genuine, and it was a valid argument. But because of that, Tomoe couldn't keep pushing. However, she wouldn't give up!

"By that same logic, isn't it insincere going to meetings with prospective marriage partners you have no intention of taking seriously?" she questioned.

Tomoe overturned his good argument with one of her own! That put a pensive look on Ichiha's face.

"You've got a point... It gets harder to refuse every time I see them, but it's not like I can just keep ignoring them either..."

"Th-Then..."

"How do you handle it, Tomoe? You've been getting offers too, right?"

An unexpected counterattack!

Her earlier attempts to make Ichiha feel the need to act fast were coming back to bite her! Because all attempts to make marriage offers to Tomoe had been shut down completely, she'd never struggled with this problem.

Tomoe looked around evasively, sipping her tea and trying to appear calm.

"W-Well... In the end, you have to turn them down sincerely, I guess?"

"Yeah, you're right," Ichiha replied, nodding repeatedly.

Tomoe had just been trying to say something inoffensive, but Ichiha was in agreement. Despite her feigned composure, her hands trembled as she held her teacup.

Urkh... I'm so bad at acting like a mature woman... she thought.

In order to compete with Yuriga, whose perspective was broadening as she grew up, Tomoe had turned to Juna for lessons on how to act like an adult woman. Perhaps thanks to that, Tomoe wasn't intimidated by adults the way she had been when Souma first hired her. She'd gained the ability to keep her composure no matter whom she was dealing with.

However, that was only on the surface level, with people she only had superficial relationships with. When it came to someone like Ichiha, who she was looking to connect with on a deeper level, she lacked the experience she'd need to show that kind of composure. He was her first love, after all. And they'd come this far with their relationship as it was.

Tomoe stared down into her cup.

This is hopeless. I can't think of where to take this. What am I supposed to do, Juna?

Inwardly, she turned to her master for help. When she did, Juna's words echoed in her mind...

"There are times when thinking with your head will get you stuck. Sometimes, you need to act honestly with your feelings. Surprisingly, there are moments when that kind of candor will work better."

This was something Juna said to her one day.

"There was a time I prioritized my own feelings over my family's situation. It was at the ceremony to reward those who distinguished themselves during the war with Amidonia. The right thing to do there would've probably been to act on behalf of the Houses of Walter and Vargas for my grandmother. But Grandmother gave me the push I needed, and that let me ask His Majesty for what I really wanted. Hee hee! Now, I'm glad I was honest with my own feelings."

Juna had patted Tomoe on the head as she said that. Even the mature Juna had given in to her emotions before, and that fact gave Tomoe the push she needed.

“I...hate this...” Tomoe said, forcing the words out. Ichiha suddenly looked up at her, surprised.

Large tears were streaming down her face.

Ichiha panicked. “T-Tomoe?! What’s wrong...?!”

While Ichiha was all shook up, Tomoe let her emotions do the talking.

“I don’t want you marrying someone else. We... We’ve been together all this time... And I want us to stay together...forever...

Sniff...”

“Well...yes. I want to be together forever too.”

“*Sniff...* Do you mean...as family? Will you be with me my whole life?” Tomoe asked between sobs. Ichiha was so preoccupied with thinking about how to make Tomoe stop crying, that he’d lost all his previous self-control and lack of confidence.

That’s why, almost reflexively, he said what he’d been holding back all this time.

“As a family—of course! Because I want you to be the one I spend the rest of my life with too...! Ah—”

A moment later, Ichiha’s eyes widened as he realized what he’d just said. There was no doubt about it—he had just proposed to Tomoe. And in response, fresh tears began to roll down Tomoe’s face.

Unlike her previous sobbing, she was outright bawling in earnest now. Ichiha still didn’t know how to react.

“U-Um...Tomoe?”

“Thank...”

“Thank...?”

“Thank *goodness*! Oh, thank *goooooodness*! You proposed, Ichiha...”

When she heard his proposal, all the tension she’d been feeling broke. These were tears of joy.

Seeing her tears, Ichiha realized that Tomoe had been waiting for him all this time. Though he hesitated at first, Ichiha resolved to get up from his seat and walked around to hug her from behind.



“Um... Sorry I’m a gutless coward, and I made you wait so long...”

“*Sniff*... Tell me about it. You’re such a dummy.”

Ichihara smiled wryly. He had to admit, he’d been a big dummy indeed, making her worry like this.

“Yes. But if you’ll have me, I hope we can be happy together.”

“Yeah.”

Tomoe relaxed, leaning her head back against Ichihara.



A little later, once they’d calmed down, Tomoe clapped her hands.

“Okay, why don’t we go tell Big Brother that we’re engaged now?”

“Huh?! So soon?”

“Yeah. It’d be nice if we could announce our engagement at the wedding.”

Tomoe was giggling, despite crying not that long ago.

She brought her hands to his face, and her expression changed gears.

“Those tears weren’t just an act...were they?”

“Hee hee! I’m not that skilled an actress. I learned that today,” Tomoe said with a soft smile. “That’s why I opened up about my feelings. It just happened to work out.”

“You’ve got me beat...”

When he saw Tomoe’s smile, Ichihara raised the white flag. When you think about it, he’d been tossed this way and that at the whims of Tomoe’s emotions today. When she stopped thinking and acted naturally, Tomoe was even more of a little devil. As Ichihara realized this, and that his fate was to be at her mercy from now on, he let out a sigh, not entirely unhappy with that outcome.

Today’s victor: Tomoe (as she got Ichihara to propose.)



Chapter 3: The Women of Each Country

It was a lovely afternoon in winter, with clear skies and warm sun. While Souma and the bureaucrats were still suffering under a homicidal workload, three of the queens were enjoying a spot of tea in one corner of the courtyard. Or to be more accurate, one of his queens and two future queens.

“Would you like another cup, Aisha?”

“Oh! Um, thank you.”

Maria poured the tea herself, and Aisha humbly accepted it.

In terms of their future hierarchy, Aisha would be ranked higher, but she paled in grace and dignity exuded by the former leader of a great nation like Maria.

Maria smiled, now turning to her fellow queen candidate.

“And you, Yuriga?”

“Ah! I’m not done with my current cup, so I’ll pass... Thank you,” Yuriga politely declined, seeming incredibly tense as she did.

The three queens present were Second Primary Queen Aisha, Fourth Primary Queen Candidate Yuriga, and Third Secondary Queen Maria. Wanting to serve the tea herself, Maria had asked the maids to stand down, so it was really just the queens to themselves.

Sitting down, Maria gave Yuriga a serene smile. “I’ve been wanting to have a good, long chat with you because we’ll be marrying Sir Souma at the same time.”

“R-Right... I see,” Yuriga replied, her face tensing. Internally, she was sweating bullets. *I’d really rather not...*

Yuriga was the younger sister of Fuuga Haan, the man who made Maria’s empire collapse, after all. The fallen empress and the sister of the man who had taken her down—theirs was a relationship that could easily become antagonistic. Yet they were both about to marry the same man. Yuriga had never heard of two people sharing such a strange fate, not even in all the books she had read before.

Is this my lot in life as the sister of a hero? Yuriga lamented.

It wasn’t just Maria though. There were too many others close to her, like Ichiha and Sami, whose relationships with Yuriga had been

complicated by her brother's actions. If there was a god, Yuriga would have wanted to give him an earful about how unfair it was.

"Yuriga," Maria called her name.

"Y-Yes!" Yuriga stammered, snapping back to her senses.

"Hee hee, you don't need to be so tense," Maria said with a chuckle. The smile on her face did nothing to ease Yuriga's anxiety.

"No, telling me that isn't going to make this any easier..."

"I'm not going to eat you or anything. Look, if I tried to hurt you, Aisha would stop me. Right?"

"Huh?! Is that what I'm here for?!" It was Aisha's turn to react with wide-eyed surprise.

"Hee hee, I was joking," Maria said with a wink and stuck out her tongue.

This exchange made Aisha and Yuriga both realize that regardless of their relative positions in the hierarchy, they'd never be a match for Maria. Her charm and poise with which she teased them were on the same level as that of the venerable Excel.

Maria sat up straight, then bowed her head to Yuriga.

"Yuriga... Thank you."

"Huh?!" The suddenness of it made Yuriga panic. "Whoa, what?! Raise your head!"

"No, I feel that I should thank you properly." Maria raised her face and looked Yuriga in the eye. "I'm told that you helped with the plan I came up with, and Souma accepted."

"I didn't do it for your sake, Madam Maria..." Yuriga replied, turning her head away petulantly. "I only did it because I thought it would help my brother too. That's all."

Yuriga hadn't stopped the Kingdom of Friedonia from intervening in the war between the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom. This was despite the fact that from the Great Tiger Kingdom's perspective, the engagement between Souma and Yuriga was a tool to keep him out of the conflict. Yuriga had even been told about the plan before Hakuya found his resolve and had agreed to cooperate.

"My brother's plan was to make you surrender and take the country, its people, and the bureaucracy all for himself. But you had no intention to surrender," Yuriga explained, still looking away. "Even if he had taken the whole of the Empire, it was clear that he wouldn't be able to maintain it, and the country would fall apart if he made enemies of your supporters. That being the case, he was better off taking some of the land and a portion of the bureaucrats, giving him a definite victory while still allowing him reconciliation with you. Simply put, it was a faster route to his dream of conquering the Demon Lord's Domain."

"Wow, you certainly thought this through," Aisha said, utterly

impressed. Despite her unparalleled martial prowess, she had no sense for politics whatsoever.

However, this sincere praise, born of that lack of sense, was embarrassing for Yuriga.

Clearing her throat noisily, she said, "It just goes to show you that Tomoe and Ichiha aren't Mr. Hakuya's only students."

"Oh, of course."

"My job was to tell my brother all this after the war and lower his hostility to this country and Sir Souma. If he gets into a conflict with this country, it will hurt both sides greatly, so I'm making sure he knows that."

"Wonderful. I can see you've got a good head on your shoulders," Maria said, clapping her hands and smiling. "You understand your brother's ideals, yet can still make choices grounded in reality. You remind me of my own little sister Jeanne. Sir Fuuga is lucky to have you."

"Y-You're giving me too much credit."

"That's not true at all. I want to be friends with you because you're like that. Although, you may feel some sense of guilt towards me."

"N-No... Not really..."

"As I said before, I'm grateful to you, and I hold no grudge. If we couldn't be friends because you feel guilty about what happened, that would be a real pity." Maria rose from her seat and leaned over to take Yuriga's hand. "We're going to be family, so I'd like to build a sisterly bond with you."

"Urgh..."

Yuriga was intimidated by how fast Maria was trying to get closer to her. She shot Aisha a glance, begging for help. However, Aisha just munched on tea sweets and shook her head.

"I don't think she has ulterior motives," Aisha said after swallowing. "She is a lot like Madam Juna, so it's best to let her do what she wants. Nothing bad will happen."

"Uh, that's not what I wanted to hear..."

"Listen, Jeanne's left my side, and I just sent Trill back home too. I need a caring little sister to pay attention to me," Maria said, pressing one hand to her cheek with a sigh.

Yuriga clutched her head. "I've only ever had a big brother. Is this what big sisters are like?!"

"I'm an only child myself, so I couldn't say," Aisha said with wry amusement as she reached for another cookie. "But when I'm around Madam Roroa, Madam Naden, and Madam Tomoe, it does make me want to dote on them like little sisters."



“Like little sisters... A family, huh?” Yuriga got a pensive look on her face.

Maria cocked her head to the side. “Is something the matter?”

“Considering my situation, I’d arranged my marriage to Souma so that I could do as much of what I want to do as possible. I don’t think it was the wrong choice, but...after being so calculating about marrying him, I’m wondering if I can be a good wife. You know, Sir Souma and his family are tight-knit, and it seems like you understand each other well too, Madam Maria.”

“Yuriga...”

It seemed Yuriga had caught the marriage blues before the wedding.

“Sir Souma is kind. He’ll scold me when I make a mistake, and even apologize after. He’s fixed me a snack late at night more times than I can remember, and I think I like him. But at the same time, he feels more like a nice friend of my brother’s... I’m marrying him for my own convenience, and it makes me wonder if that’s really okay...”

“I think...you feel that way because you care about him, you know?” Maria smiled as she reached out and patted Yuriga on the head. “You have a somewhat unique situation, but he’s told you that even once you’re married, you’ll be free to do as you please for a while, right? If you were to have a change of heart at some point, I’m sure Sir Souma would accept it. I think you should take your time and not rush to an answer.”

“Ha ha, she’s right, you know?” Aisha agreed with a laugh. “We all had our own circumstances when we married Sir Souma. I’m told that Madam Naden once asked if the love that starts out prearranged by someone else isn’t real love. This might surprise you, but any number of things can end up deepening a relationship. I don’t think you need to worry so much.”

“Madam Maria, Madam Aisha...”

Listening to the two of them had slightly alleviated Yuriga’s concern.

Maria started giggling. “Though, I’m going to get in my share of flirting with Sir Souma first.”

“Er, flirting...?”

“Nothing’s holding me back now, so I’m going to do what I want! In love and in work! It’s time for me to take back all those years of my youth I spent supporting the Empire!”

As Maria clenched her fist and made this impassioned speech, Yuriga felt her image of the fallen empress of a destroyed country crumble. Even with her country split and herself far from her former lands, Maria was still herself, shining powerfully. Watching her made

Yuriga's own worries seem silly.

"Ha ha... Is that right?" Yuriga said with a slight laugh.

"Well, if you're uneasy about being a wife... We have just the thing," Aisha said nonchalantly as she savored her tea.

Maria and Yuriga both cocked their heads to the side. Aisha looked around to see that no one was watching before beckoning them closer. They did so, leaning in so their faces were close to hers.

Aisha covered her mouth with one hand and whispered, "We queens all receive...special lessons..."

What she went on to explain made the other two flush red. And they both agreed they would definitely participate next time.

Third bridal training course, date unscheduled...



The war between the Empire and the Great Tiger Kingdom in the 1552nd year of the Continental Calendar changed the world.

There had been a three-way competition between Fuuga's Great Tiger Kingdom, the Empire's Mankind Declaration, and the Maritime Alliance. However, with the fall of the Empire and its exit from the Mankind Declaration, there were only two factions remaining. The Great Tiger Kingdom became the most powerful country in the world, with the land, population, and personnel of the northern half of the continent. Meanwhile, the Maritime Alliance welcomed the Euphoria Kingdom, founded from the remains of the Empire, as a new ally, increasing their strength as well.

Furthermore, with Souma—the head of the Maritime Alliance—marrying Maria, and Black-Robed Prime Minister Hakuya marrying Queen Jeanne of Euphoria, coordination between the two states deepened, allowing them to effectively rule as if they were one nation. The people of these two countries called the new nation the "Gran Friedonia Empire," and Souma came to be called Emperor Friedonia.

In order to compete, Fuuga followed Hashim's suggestion to rename the Great Tiger Kingdom of Haan the "Great Tiger Empire of Haan," and began calling himself Great Tiger Emperor Fuuga Haan.

It was an era where two emperors—one north and one south—vied for power. Although, Souma was only being called an emperor by the people, and Fuuga only assumed the title because his retainer suggested it, so neither emperor was that attached to being called one. Every country had to adapt to this new bipolar world.

In an effort to stabilize their expanded territory, the Great Tiger Empire developed a new bureaucracy around their top bureaucrat, Lumiere. Using the skill at public works she had developed in the Empire, she took advantage of the mobility of Malmkhitan's cavalry to lay out a transportation network. It unfolded at a pace far greater than

the road network Souma had built during the first year after he was summoned.

“Sir Kasen. The next document, please.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Lumiere was in the governmental affairs office of Haan Castle, surrounded by piles of documents with her feather pen.

Fuuga had the charisma to sway others and his martial prowess was absolute, but he had no particular gift for governing. (It’s not that he couldn’t govern, but he was unmotivated and inefficient.) That’s why Hashim and Lumiere ran the administration of the Great Tiger Empire now. However, Hashim also had to handle diplomacy and political strategy, so domestic affairs fell squarely on Lumiere’s shoulders.

Lumiere used Kasen Shuri, the Crossbow of the Tiger—who had been picked out as her assistant due to his youth and ability—as an extension of herself in the battle against all this paperwork.

Sigh... Now I see why Madam Maria always kept a bed in the governmental affairs office. When there’s this much work, it’s hard to go back to your own room. Lumiere let out a sigh as her hands kept moving. And she handled diplomacy, political strategy, and even requests from the people like performing as a lorelei on top of this. I always knew she was great, but she was even greater than I imagined... I can see why she wanted to abandon all this work. If only she had the opportunity...

And Fuuga and Lumiere were the ones who gave that opportunity to Maria. Now that it was over, she could see that all of the factions had been working to let Maria abandon her country. Lumiere had been indignant when she first realized her empress had been the one to give up on her, but at this point, she was over it and working towards her own goals.

I want to control a great nation from within the bureaucracy, and win glory by accomplishing mankind’s dream of completely liberating the Demon Lord’s Domain. My goal hasn’t changed. That’s why I parted ways with Madam Maria and my friend Jeanne. Now I must make it a reality so I can hold my head high in front of them.

“Sir Kasen. Please take this document to Sir Hashim.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Kasen was overwhelmed by Lumiere.

He had stood at the side of fierce, courageous generals like Fuuga and Shuukin who shone like stars, so he thought that he was used to seeing great people. He believed that even if he were faced with famous generals from other countries, he wouldn’t be frightened or falter.

Now that he was being cowed by an administrator, it confused him.

Madam Lumiere is incredible, Kasen thought.

And for some reason...seeing Lumiere single-mindedly throw herself into her work reminded him of how cool Fuuga and Shuukin looked, leading the charge on the front lines of battle. If we were to put this in terms of Souma's old world, Kasen might have been like a new hire at a company, infatuated with a career woman.

"What are you doing? Please, get going immediately."

"Huh?! S-Sorry!"

Once Lumiere called him out for his dawdling, Kasen shot out of the room with an armful of paperwork. It was another thing that made him look like a new hire.

Thanks to Lumiere's efforts, the Great Tiger Empire was able to rapidly overcome the bottlenecks imposed on it by the instability that came with acquiring new territory.



Meanwhile, there was another woman struggling to manage her state...

It was the newly crowned queen of the Euphoria Kingdom, Jeanne.

Jeanne was in her own governmental affairs office, surrounded by paperwork...and sick of it.

"Sir Hakuya... Could we please take a break already?"

Jeanne was an irresistible force on the battlefield, but her aptitude for paperwork wasn't very high. Her groaning made Hakuya, who was with her more as an instructor than an assistant, feel sorry for Jeanne, but that didn't stop him from giving her a new document to work on.

"Please. At least look through these papers and sign off on them. They concern the reorganization of the Gran Chaos Empire's fleet and the regular stationing of the Maritime Alliance fleet in this country."

"The fleets are our 'shield' now, after all..." Jeanne said as she accepted the paperwork.

"Indeed." Hakuya nodded. "They're a gift your sister left us. An incredibly valuable one at that."

In the fall of the Empire, the Euphoria Kingdom had lost its northern lands, Lumiere and her bureaucrats, and half of their air force. However, because Maria had taken steps to ensure their naval forces were concentrated in the south, their fleet was mostly intact, barring some ships that had been owned by the lords of the northern coast. While those naval forces were obviously no match for the Kingdom of Friedonia's—owing to that country's use of island carriers—they were at least equal to the Nine-Headed Dragon Kingdom's fleet.

Considering their shrunken nation, the amount of maritime power

at their disposal was a little excessive. Because of this fleet, if Fuuga were to attack them again, they could use their ships to withdraw, or launch powerful attacks against his poorly guarded coastlines. The Euphoria Fleet was a shield that deterred their enemy from attacking, and also a sword.

Suddenly, a new voice said, "Hee hee! That's what you called me for, isn't it?"

Jeanne turned in the direction of the voice, and there stood a buxom beauty with blue hair and a little pair of antlers on her head. It was the commander in chief of the Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force, Excel Walter.

"Oh, I'm sorry to make you come all this way," Jeanne said. She moved to get up so she could bow her head, but Excel gestured for her to stop with her fan.

"You're the queen of a nation now. You mustn't go bowing to a general from another country."

"R-Right... But..."

"Duchess Walter is correct. There's no need for you to bow," Hakuya said nonchalantly as Jeanne tried to figure out how to respond. Then he turned his cold eyes towards Excel. "You had 'free time on your hands,' yes? I'm told that you've been having Sir Ludwin assume your duties as commander in chief of the National Defense Force and letting Sir Castor command the navy."

"Hee hee, it's important to train your successors, you know?" Excel said with a laugh, covering her mouth with her fan.

"Yes," Hakuya agreed with a fake smile that looked like it had been plastered to his face. "That is why you've been invited to come and command the Euphoria Fleet."

"You and your lord are both dead set on not letting me have a peaceful retirement, I see."

"I will take that as a compliment," Hakuya replied.

Although they were both smiling, neither thought it was sincere. That said, this conversation was possible because they each knew that the other was intelligent, and the reasoning behind their actions. However, Jeanne, who understood none of this and was watching the two schemers smile at each other, wanted nothing more than to clutch her head.

Sister... Being a queen is too great a burden for me... Jeanne thought.

Excel tapped her fan. "Well, you had best get all this sorted out quickly. You have other important duties to attend to, don't you?"

"Other...important...duties?" Jeanne was confused. Excel looked at Hakuya with a chuckle.

"I mean your wedding, of course."

The moment she said that, Jeanne turned a bright red and Hakuya

grimaced. Their reactions only made Excel smile with greater cheer.



Chapter 4: During the Gaudy Banquet

—1st month, 1553rd year, Continental Calendar—

“Hahhh!”

“Too soft!”

Two men were fighting with sword and spears on the deck of the island carrier Hiryyuu. One was the captain, Castor, and the other was the Red Oni: commander of the Dratroopers, Halbert Magna.

As Halbert swung his two spears one after the other, Castor parried with the sword he held in one hand, summoning flames in his other to slam into Halbert. Sometimes Halbert dodged those flames. Other times he deflected them as he looked for a chance to strike the decisive blow. Both combatants used fire-type magic, but as a dragonewt, Castor’s was more powerful. Understanding the disadvantage he’d have in a long-range fight, Halbert was desperate not to let Castor pull away from him.

Castor was a good enough warrior to fight on even terms with Aisha, making him one of the best in the Kingdom. Nonetheless, Halbert was holding his own, so there was no clear victor. Consequently, that meant that Halbert was also among the best fighters in the Kingdom—the fruit of years of hard training.

““““Woooooo!”””” the crew of the Hiryyuu and Halbert’s subordinates cheered as they watched from a distance. Their eyes were glued to this battle between warriors which had been elevated to a higher dimension.

“Tch!” Sick of the stalemate, Castor spread his wings and took to the air. He was looking to settle things with a magic attack from high above Halbert, who couldn’t fly without Ruby the red dragon.

However...

“Not gonna happen!” Halbert threw one of his twin-snake spears skywards.

The spear sailed over Castor’s head in an arch. As Castor and the audience were thinking it missed, Halbert was running to the spot where it would land.

“What?!” Castor cried out in surprise as a ring that passed over his

head was formed by the chain connecting the two spears.

Halbert then pulled on the spears to reel in the chain.

“Hi-yahhhh!”

“Argh!”

The shrinking chain wrapped itself around Castor’s wings, throwing him off-balance. Just as he was about to slam into the ground, he suddenly recovered enough to land on all fours instead.



But as Castor raised his head, Halbert's spear was at his throat. Castor glared up at Halbert as he stared down at him threateningly, but soon his lips curled into a smile.

"You got me. I yield."

"““Yeahhhh!””” The spectators let out a throaty cheer as Castor admitted defeat.

Halbert had finally scored a victory against Castor. Those who had seen Halbert train and strive to improve since his early years celebrated his victory as if it were their own.

"You've gotten strong, Halbert," Castor said, accepting Halbert's hand as he was pulled to his feet. "The short-lived races grow fast. You were nothing but a child to me just the other day."

"Don't measure me by the values of the long-lived races."

Long-lived races like the elves, dragonewts, and sea serpents had a tendency to think about things continuously due to their longevity. Consequently, their abilities developed at a more relaxed pace than those of humans or beastmen. They were well-suited to specializing in something and refining their ability to do it. But those with more normal lifespans were used to thinking about time limits, and were able to achieve results in a short time frame.

Castor put a hand on Halbert's shoulder. "But you managed to beat me, a man with a century of experience. You can be prouder of that."

Halbert grinned and shook his head. "I've still got a ways to go. There's a guy I want to beat."

After a pause, Castor asked, "Is it Fuuga Haan?"

"Yeah. If it comes to it, I must be able to defend my family and country."

Halbert looked at the spears in his hands. He seemed pretty worked up, but Castor simply shrugged.

"Didn't the king tell you to not shoulder everything yourself?"

"I'm a man. I don't want to act indulgent. I want to defend the people I care about with my own hands."

"You're a real warrior. I'll give you that."

As they were praising the other's performance, two women worked their way through the crowd of burly men and rushed to Halbert's side.

"Jeez! What do you think you're doing at a time like this?!" Ruby, Halbert's second wife, berated them. "We have to be at the wedding in the capital! You shouldn't be having one of your little sparring matches now!"

"Uh, well... We had time to spare, so I thought I'd have the captain give me some lessons..." Halbert desperately tried to explain

himself, but...

“There’s no need for excuses, Lord Hal.”

Looking good in her National Defense Force uniform, a beautiful lady with an air of intelligence about her stood in front of Halbert. She was tall and slim, with long legs, and the lower half of her uniform was hot-pants length—not full pants like Liscia’s—so it showed off her stunning legs without reservation. Her brown skin and elf ears identified her as a dark elf.

“Urkh, Velza.”

She was one of Tomoe’s school friends at the Academy, and had joined the National Defense Force after graduation. With backing from Halbert’s first wife Kaede, Velza was able to achieve her dream of serving under Halbert.

Velza leveled a finger at him. “What do you mean, ‘urkh’? That’s an awful thing to say to your cute subordinate.”

“S-Sorry... But should you really be calling yourself cute?”

“I *am* cute though, aren’t I? I’m quite popular in the military, you know? Mainly with the women.”

““Ah...”” Halbert and Ruby looked at Velza with pity.

Her short hair gave her a boyish look. Being tall on top of that, with regular features, gave her the appearance of either a pretty boy in girls’ clothes or an elegant lady in menswear. For the members of the House of Magna who had known Velza since she was little, they knew how her eyes sparkled at the sight of tasty food, so they had a strong image of her as acting like a girl her age.

Velza cleared her throat loudly. “More *importantly*, Lord Hal. We have an invitation to His Majesty’s wedding. I also received invitations from one of the brides, Yuriga...erm, Lady Yuriga, and from Sir Ichiha who will be announcing his engagement to Lady Tomoe. It would be inexcusable for us to be late.”

“Well, it’s just a short flight for Ruby...”

“That doesn’t mean you can leave Lady Kaede to take care of all the preparations in the capital by herself, does it?! Little Bill—Halbert and Kaede’s son—must be waiting for you to come home too.”

“Right...” Halbert hung his head as a younger woman berated him.

The brave warrior of moments before was nowhere to be seen now. The onlookers chuckled at the scene until Halbert gave them a death glare that sent them scattering.

Ruby, who had been watching this exchange, nodded in agreement. “You’ve become so reliable, Velza.”

“Uh, I’d rather you talk her down a bit.”

“I don’t want to. I’m with Velza on this...”

With that said, Ruby transformed into a great red dragon,

stretching her head towards Halbert and Velza and speaking directly inside their heads.

“Let’s get going. Both of you, hop on, chop-chop.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Got it.”

Halbert and Velza both responded then climbed onto Ruby’s back.

Velza sat in front of Halbert, tying herself to him securely with rope. Normally, only a dragon’s partner could ride them, but Velza was already more or less guaranteed to marry Halbert, so they used the old “partner of my partner” justification to sidestep that issue.

Once they were ready to go, Halbert saluted to Castor who was down below them.

“So long, Captain. We’re heading off now.”

“Take care. I’ll be going myself later.”

Once Castor snapped off a navy-style salute, Ruby lifted off into the sky.

Having seen off the Magnas, Castor felt a strong desire to be with his own family. Accela, Carla, Carl... They’d all be there for the wedding, so he’d be able to see them again. Following the restoration of the House of Carmine’s honor, so too was the House of Vargas restored, and with it permission to see his family. However, as he didn’t like prying eyes, Castor had decided not to return to the house for the time being.

Heh... It’ll be good to see them, Castor thought as he gazed off in the direction the Magnas had gone.



—Late in the 1st month, 1553rd year, Continental Calendar —
Royal Capital Parnam—

It was a bright day with clear skies, though the snow that’d fallen the other day still lingered on the rooftops.

The multi-wedding event centered around Souma, Maria, and Yuriga’s ceremony was underway in Parnam. Souma and his family would have preferred to hold off on the wedding until spring, but in anticipation of sudden moves by the Great Tiger Empire of Haan, they had decided to hold the ceremony while they could.

Now, Souma’s retainers were getting married all around the capital as part of this event.

Tomoe’s birth mother—Tomoko, and Inugami—the second-in-command of the Black Cats, were one such couple. Attendees included Jirukoma, Komain, and some friends of Tomoko’s among the refugees who’d relocated to the new port city of Venetanova, as well as the mystic wolves involved in making Kikkoro-brand miso and soy sauce. Inugami’s identity was concealed, so none of his acquaintances were

able to be in attendance. However, he'd still received a small mountain of flowers and other gifts from Kagetora and other well-wishers in the Black Cats.

Inugami wore a tuxedo but didn't remove his mask, making those unfamiliar with his situation do a double take when they saw him. Tomoko chuckled when she saw how awkward he felt about it.

"Congratulations! Father, Mother."

"Congratulations, both of you."

Tomoe's little brother Rou and her friend Lucy came to congratulate them.

Rou had still been little when he first came to the Kingdom, but now he was around ten years old. Having lost his biological father at a young age, and lacking any real memories of him, he'd long since accepted the family's protector Inugami as a father figure.

Lucy, meanwhile, was here on behalf of Tomoe. She had brought a basket of expensive fruits as a gift.

"These're from Tomie. She says she'll come runnin' as soon as her engagement's been announced."

"Oh, my! Thank you."

Tomoe was at the castle now to announce her engagement with Ichiha. She'd have liked to be at her birth mother's wedding, but her engagement was a matter of national importance, so Tomoko and Inugami had told her not to worry about it.

Lucy snickered to herself. "I bet ya Tomie'll rush in here with her fiancé in tow."

"Oh, my. Oh, my," Tomoko said with a soft smile while Inugami groaned in chagrin.

"This should be the happiest day of my life, and I haven't a shred of regret about my choices, but...it's a shame I won't be there to see the honored little sister's engagement announced."

Lucy could only laugh politely at Inugami's heartfelt disappointment.

"Ah ha ha... You're sure hard done by, huh?"

"What do you mean?" Rou asked, tilting his head to the side adorably.

Lucy smiled wryly and said, "I mean, he's a pain in the butt to deal with."

"Father, you're a pain in the butt!" Rou shouted, raising both hands with all the innocence of a child. There was no malice behind his words.

"Gwah!"

Inugami was laid low, like a boxer KO'd after a critical hit. It was so funny that everyone, Tomoko included, burst out laughing.

Meanwhile, at another wedding venue, Mio Carmine—daughter of Georg, former General of the Army—was holding a ceremony with her groom, Gatsby C. Carmine.

In attendance was Halbert's father Glaive (due to his connection with Georg), Souma's personal trainer Owen, and other military members with ties to Mio's father. On Colbert's side were his friend Julius and his wife Tia, his coworkers in the Ministry of Finance, and the loreleis like Nanna and Pamille whom he was always helping. It was probably unusual for the bride and groom's guests to split so neatly into members of the military and bureaucratic/cultural wings of the country.

"Okay, here it comes!"

"Whoa! Madam Mio?! You threw it too high!"

With the ceremony finished, Mio was so delighted to be bound to Colbert as wife and husband that she threw the bouquet with all her might. The women in attendance were aiming to catch the bouquet and get some of that marital bliss for themselves. However, the bouquet flew so high into the air that they decided its landing spot would be too dangerous to be in, so they all scattered.

Julius palmed his face in exasperation before turning to Jirukoma's wife Lauren, who was attending as Tia's bodyguard.

"Madam Lauren, would you please?"

"Yes, sir," Lauren replied before rushing to the landing point and catching the bouquet. "I'm already married, so..."

She gently tossed the bouquet towards the other women. The one to catch it was Pamille Carol of the childlike kobito race. Pamille looked stunned for a moment before breaking into a grin as the other attendees clapped. Mio was so grateful to Julius and Lauren for their quick response that she bowed her head repeatedly.

There was a shadow watching the noisy wedding proceedings from a distance—the commander of the Black Cats, Kagetora. He was absolutely in no way connected to the bride whatsoever, but he gave a satisfied nod when he saw Mio's big day being celebrated by so many of his friends and acquaintances.

"You could watch from closer, not way out here, you know?"

"...!" Kagetora tensed at the sudden voice.

At some point, the late Georg's wife, Mio's mother, had appeared beside him. The suddenness of her appearance would have put his covert operatives to shame.

Kagetora looked at the pitch-black cape he was shrouded in.

"This cape has magic that is supposed to interfere with people's perception of me..." he said quietly.

The wife chuckled. "I simply checked where you seemed most likely to be. I believed you were not so heartless that you wouldn't

come, yet you couldn't bring yourself to come any closer. I surmised you would be watching from the shadows, neither too near nor too far away."

"You amaze me..." Kagetora's expression twitched underneath the mask. That was because he was ashamed of his immaturity, and awed by this woman's prowess.

Mio noticed the two of them and waved, smiling broadly.

The perception impairing magic wasn't perfect. If someone was with him and they noticed that person, they could see him too. Was it only her mother Mio was waving at? Or perhaps...

The wife waved to Mio, whispering, "With Mio finding herself a good man, that's one less worry our house needs to deal with."

"You speak as if there are others..."

"Yes. There's an especially *large* one still," the wife said to him with a smile.

Kagetora looked away, unable to say anything in response.



Also on that same day, Valois, the capital of the Euphoria Kingdom, was in the middle of its own festivities. Queen Jeanne and Prime Minister Hakuya were getting married.

Hakuya would be marrying into her family as royal consort, so his name would be Hakuya Euphoria from this day forward.

Just as the ceremony was about to begin, Jeanne, who was wearing the traditional Imperial wedding dress, smiled at Hakuya as he stood beside her.

"You look good in white too," she remarked.

"I'm having trouble calming down though."

The Black-Robed Prime Minister normally wore black clothes, as you would expect from his sobriquet. But he obviously couldn't wear black to his own wedding, so he was clad in a pure-white tuxedo.

Jeanne wrapped her arm around Hakuya's as he loomed awkwardly, then rested her head on his shoulder.

"How many times have I dreamed of this day? I thought it would never be more than a dream."

Hakuya gently put his hand over Jeanne's and said, "It was the same for me. I've longed for the day I could be with you like this."

"Ah ha ha... But I never thought I'd be a queen when it happened!"

"I have to agree on that too."



As the two of them were laughing about it, Trill interjected, incensed by this saccharine display. “Um... Could you two save that stuff for later? You know, on your own time, when the ceremony is over and done with?”

That snapped the two of them back to their senses, and they quickly pulled apart.

Trill cleared her throat loudly in an attempt to move on, then lifted up the corners of her skirt and curtsied. “Congratulations. Big Sister Jeanne, Big Brother Hakuya.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Trill.”

“Thank you, Lady Trill.”

Once the two of them thanked her, Trill looked up and grinned.

“Big Brother, please take care of Big Sister for me.”

“Yes. Of course I will.”

“When she gets angry, do try to calm her down, will you?”

“Yes,” he replied reflexively. After a moment, he muttered, “Hm?”

Trill cackled.

“From now on, when I cause a problem and Big Sister is giving me trouble for it, I’ll come running to you for protection. You’ll protect your darling little sister-in-law, won’t you?”

“Trill!” Jeanne shouted, causing Trill to quickly hide behind Hakuya.

“Look, it’s your move now, Big Brother.”

“Hold on, Trill! It’s not fair for you to use Sir Hakuya as a shield!”

“Good grief...” Hakuya groaned, caught between two of the Euphoria sisters.

He’d had plenty of opportunities to see Souma getting run ragged by his fiancées (now wives) when he was in the Kingdom of Friedonia. If he’d known he would be facing this himself, he should have used his time in Friedonia to learn how Souma handled family squabbles.

Hakuya was rather regretting the fact he hadn’t done so now.



The story now returns to Parnam in the Kingdom of Friedonia...

While a number of retainers were having their weddings in town, Souma, Yuriga, and Maria were having their ceremony in the castle. The audience chamber had been decorated for the occasion, and retainers like Excel and Castor lined both sides of the red carpet that led from the entrance up to the throne.

As the band played, Maria and Yuriga silently walked along that carpet wrapped in wedding dresses. Maria’s gait was elegant and confident, while Yuriga’s was stiff and tense. It was hard to blame her, given this was being broadcast around the country.

King Souma and First Primary Queen Liscia were sitting on the thrones they were walking towards. Next to them were Acting Prime Minister Ichiha and future chamberlain Tomoe, who had just announced their engagement to the public.

When she saw Tomoe chuckle at how tense she seemed, Yuriga pursed her lips in irritation. That anger gave her the courage—false or not—to puff up her chest with pride, and that helped her to loosen up.

Maria and Yuriga proceeded to where Souma was, then both dropped to one knee. When they did, Souma and Liscia rose from their thrones.

Souma descended the steps to walk in front of them. Liscia first received the two tiaras that would mark them as queens from Tomoe, then moved to stand beside Souma.

Then Souma spoke.

“Madam Maria of the Euphoria Kingdom and Madam Yuriga Haan of the Great Tiger Empire of Haan, I hereby welcome you as queens of this country. Through this ceremony, I hope to forge an everlasting friendship between our nations.”

““Yes,”” Maria and Yuriga replied, bowing their heads in unison.

Souma took the tiaras from Liscia and placed them on their heads as proof of their queenly status. During the first wedding with Liscia and the others, they had kissed at this point, but that was skipped over this time. That was because this ceremony’s diplomatic significance was being emphasized over it being a wedding. There was no telling how the Great Tiger Empire might act in the future, so he was trying to be considerate of the delicate position Yuriga might find herself in.

After the ceremony concluded, Souma and Maria stood side by side on the balcony with the broadcast jewel. They put on a display that told the assembled crowd and those watching the broadcast that a wedding had just taken place, and that it would strengthen the coordination between the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom. Once they saw the peaceful smile on Maria’s face, those who loved and respected her in the Euphoria Kingdom would feel at ease too.

“Oh, right, you worked as a lorelei too, didn’t you, Maria?” Souma asked in a quiet voice as he waved to the people. Maria cocked her head to the side questioningly.

“Yes, I did. Why do you ask?”

“Well... I thought this when I married Juna too, but your male fans are gonna hate me, huh? I can just imagine them making hundreds of straw dolls right now...”

“Why would they do that?”

“They’re used in a curse from my old world.”

“Oh, that sort of thing,” Maria said with a happy chuckle. “I suppose whatever happens, happens. Try to accept it for what it is.”

“You say that like it’s not your problem...”

“Well, you are the one who stole me, the object of their affections.”

With that, Maria pecked Souma on the cheek.

The crowd watching from below the balcony erupted in applause seeing the newlyweds showing clear signs of affection. The jewel had caught all of it too, and broadcast it to fountain plazas around both countries.

Souma was speechless for a moment. With a twitching smile on his face, he said, “I think you just increased the number of straw dolls by fifty percent.”

Maria laughed out loud.



While the Kingdom of Friedonia was in a celebratory mood, Zem City, the capital of the Mercenary State, was on fire.

The mercenaries were cornered in the colosseum—assaulted by the common people, wielding farming implements and kitchen knives in place of proper weapons. Not even the mercenaries, who were confident in their abilities, could stand in the face of these numbers. There were clearly some experienced fighters in the mob too, so the mercenaries went down one after another.

“It’s time to change this country from the bottom up!”

“Show the oppressive mercenaries our wrath!”

“Emperor Fuuga Haan is with us!”

It had seemed might made right in this country, but the suppressed anger of the populace exploded, causing them to rise in rebellion. However, it was clear that the Great Tiger Empire of Haan—which is to say Fuuga’s advisor Hashim—was scheming in the shadows.

It all started with the Zemish mercenaries’ unauthorized retreat during the war with the Gran Chaos Empire.

Hashim denounced them after the conflict was over, and worked with Moumei, who was acting as the Mercenary King, to prosecute them for deserting. The mercenaries, who hated being restricted as a general rule, pushed back against this and holed up in key cities in order to resist Fuuga’s forces. These people had lived by the strength of their arms all this time. When the mercenaries dug their heels in to resist, it wasn’t because they intended to protect the country or land. If things went south, they probably thought they’d be able to flee, possibly even out of the country to become adventurers in the worst case.

But their ill-conceived plans would never work against the cold and calculating Hashim, of course. There were sparks for conflict.

This country was founded by mercenaries. Strength was everything here, but the weak and downtrodden existed, and they had their grievances with the mercenaries. The former Mercenary King, Gimbal, had been a talented monarch, and had managed his mercs in a way that kept the populace's resentment from manifesting. After his defeat by Fuuga, Gimbal was removed from the throne and went into retirement. This was when Hashim began inciting the populace, who were in a weak position.

"The mercenaries boast of their strength and look down on the weak, but see how they flee when the battle turns against them! People of Zem! How long have you let these men oppress you?! With Fuuga Haan as your protector, you must smash this country's system and let it be born anew!"

This powerful speech stirred up the common people. Hashim had made the Great Tiger Empire's problem with the Zemish mercenaries a domestic problem for Zem, leading to mercenaries and the people opposing each other. Even after the mercenaries holed up inside key cities, the ones who maintained them were the civilians—an overwhelmingly larger population. The Zemish mercenaries found themselves assaulted by the people inside the cities they were trying to hold.

The former king Gimbal, choosing not to side with the mercenaries who had relied on him, was another factor.

The mercenaries had asked him to raise the flag of rebellion against the Great Tiger Empire, but he refused, saying he was retired. He had always ruled with policies that favored the people, so he had no reason to side with mercenaries who only worked for their own self-interest.

Gimbal was now under the watchful eye of Moumei's agents and placed under house arrest in his small cabin in the mountains, but it was essentially a peaceful retirement. That was because Moumei respected Gimbal's achievements, and arranged for him to be able to live without inconvenience.

And now Zem City, the last bastion of the mercenaries, was about to be liberated.

"Face our wrath of many years!"

"Eek! Stay away! Stay awaaay!"

Ironically, the location where the endless horde of commoners had cornered the mercenaries was the colosseum that was the symbol of this city itself. Here, in the place many had won acclaim and far more had been disgraced as losers, the mercenaries fell one after another.

Naturally, Hashim didn't leave this entirely to the people. They had been infiltrated by the Great Tiger Empire's elites and other rogue soldiers who supported Fuuga in order to ensure the Zemish mercenaries were annihilated.

In their agitated state, the people were brutal, ripping the fallen mercenaries apart—to the point where it was hard to tell which parts had belonged to whom anymore. When the people came to their senses, the bodies would be buried in a cemetery near the colosseum, and a memorial service held, but that was no consolation to the mercenaries.

Having lost the mercenaries who were central to their national defense, the people turned to Fuuga Haan for protection. Fuuga accepted their request, annexing the country and appointing Moumei as governor of the Zem Region.

And so, Mercenary State Zem vanished from the map.

Meanwhile, there was another uproar underway in the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State...

The hardliners—who in the name of Lunaria, had been executing moderates for wanting to distance themselves from Fuuga—had now fractured into two factions.

One side was the pope faction, who wanted Fuuga to be subordinate to their religious authority. The other side was the saint faction, centered around Anne. They believed that as the holy king, Fuuga's will was the will of God, and they should serve him as they spread the word.

However, this rift was easily settled. That was because the saint's faction had the military backing of the Great Tiger Empire. As soon as the conflict began, the pope was taken into the Great Tiger Empire's custody.

In Chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli said, "If Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus had been unarmed, they could not have enforced their constitutions for long."

Machiavelli also noted that because Girolamo Savonarola—who incited the people to drive the Medici out of Florence and ruled it for a time—lacked arms of his own, he had no way to preserve himself once his popularity failed, and so he was lost to the flames.

The pope's faction met the same fate as Savonarola.

The former pope was imprisoned, and eventually "died of undetermined causes" at the hands of Hashim. Was it poison, or was he thrown to his death? The remnants of his faction met the same fate as the moderates before them. They were branded heretics and burned at the stake.

The people of the Orthodox Papal State watched quietly as the

heretics were burned in the town square. The populace was obedient to the church, and that didn't change when the higher-ups were replaced by members of the saint faction. Even if the old higher-ups who'd declared their new masters as heretics were now tied to logs as they burned alive, the populace had no doubt that the right thing was being done.

Anne quietly watched events unfold from on high. It was as if she were burning the heretics into her memory. When the flames burned out and the heretics were no more, all light had vanished from her eyes. The girl had killed her heart in the name of her duty as saint.

And so, while the Orthodox Papal State would continue to exist as a country, it would be ruled directly by the Great Tiger Kingdom. During the gaudy banquet, the world was changing rapidly.



Chapter 5: Invitation to the North

The Great Tiger Empire of Haan had destroyed the Mercenary State Zem and had taken hold of the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State. With this, Fuuga now had a system in place to move the continent at his whims. A combined state, larger than any that had existed before, founded by the great man of the era.

Wise people likely had doubts that this country could hold together once they lost Fuuga's charisma. However, most people didn't realize this. They delighted in Fuuga's exploits as if they were their own, and supported him fervently. This was a country that could even retake the Demon Lord's Domain. No, they could go even further: they could force the Maritime Union into submission and unite the continent—a dream no one had ever been able to realize before.

Dreamers don't tend to think ahead. They're too busy dreaming to think about what comes after.

The important thing is to make their dream come true—to get the things they want—and the results of that are left as a secondary consideration. This was true of Fuuga too. "I'm gonna do it because no one else will." That's all that had taken him this far.

"How far...can I go?"

One night, as he lay in his canopied bed, Fuuga mumbled that to himself. When he did, Mutsumi, who was resting on his arm as her pillow, rubbed her sleepy eyes and began to stir.

"Darling...?"

"Oh, sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No. It's all right."

Mutsumi pressed herself close against Fuuga. They were both completely naked, each feeling the other's warmth.

"Is something the matter?" she asked softly.

"Oh, nothing much. I was thinking about how we took Zem and the Orthodox Papal State, how Yuriga's married now, and...where this country is heading next..."

Mutsumi chuckled. "You're feeling uncharacteristically sentimental."

“Oh, shove off... The world and this era are changing moment by moment. Our country’s rise wiped several nations off the map, which is still being redrawn. And that little twerp Yuriga is somebody’s wife now, you know?”

“Hee hee, that last bit is the part that really makes you feel how much time’s gone by, isn’t it?”

“I was thinking about how things are always gonna change. The era, this country, and us.”

After saying that, Fuuga let out a big yawn.

Mutsumi sat up and leaned over Fuuga, brushing her long, black hair back over her shoulder before kissing his forehead. Mutsumi always appeared so pure and clean, but for just this moment, there was something alluring about her.

“I decided to be with you—no matter how the times change or how the world changes. So, please, run down the path you believe in, and show me things I’ve never seen before. These days we’ve spent together since we were freed from our small countries in the Union of Eastern Nations certainly haven’t been bad by any means.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Fuuga stretched out his thick arm and pulled Mutsumi closer.

The next day, in the audience chamber of Great Haan Castle, Fuuga greeted Hashim and Moumei, who had finished exterminating the rebel elements in the Zem Region, and Anne, who had purged their political opponents inside the Orthodox Papal State. Mutsumi stood by his side as he sat on the throne, her expression resolute.

“Well done, everyone.”

““““Yes, sir!””””

The three of them knelt down and bowed in response to Fuuga’s praise.

Anne raised her head, then put her hands together in front of her face, as if praying to him.

“There is something I would like to show you, Holy King Fuuga,” she announced.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“Bring it in, please...”

Anne raised her hand, and a group of men dressed in the raiment Lunarian Orthodoxy appeared, carrying some large object on their shoulders between them like a portable shrine. It was large enough that Hashim and Moumei had to step aside so it could pass. With a heavy *thud*, the men set it down behind Anne.

The object was tall enough to make people look up at it, and was also wide and thick. Everyone aside from Anne stared at it, dumbstruck.

“Hey, Anne. What is it?” Fuuga asked, and Anne raised her hand to give the signal.

The cloth was pulled off of it, revealing what looked like a massive stone tablet, or perhaps a monument.

Anne assumed a pose as if she were praying before it, then said, “This is the greatest treasure of Lunarian Orthodoxy, the Lunalith.”

“Oh-hoh... Is that what this is?” Hashim, who had been watching from the side, stroked his chin. “I believe future events are carved into this monument, yes?”

“Yes. We’ve only been able to decrypt fragments, but the orthodox pope managed the country according to the prophecies of this monolith. I had it brought here in case it can be of use to you, Lord Fuuga,” Anne said with one hand over her chest.

However, Fuuga furrowed his brow.

“What rubbish...” he said dismissively. “If that were true, why is the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State in our hands now?”

He rested his elbow on the arm of the throne and his chin on the palm of his hand before he continued, saying, “Why were the heretics destroyed? If they knew from the prophecies that this would happen, they’d have been ready for it.”

“Well... They must have misinterpreted Lady Lunaria’s guidance.”

“If things work out, it’s because they followed the prophecy. If they fail, it’s because they misinterpreted it. That doesn’t sound any different from your common fortune teller to me. And I’m not gonna be ruled by a future someone else told me. We’ll cut a wide swath towards the future and win it for ourselves. Like we have all along.”

Mutsumi and Moumei nodded, agreeing with Fuuga. Hashim shrugged, not objecting, while Anne stared at Fuuga with envy.

“Besides,” Fuuga added, digging the wax out of one ear while looking bored, “Souma’s probably got experts on this kinda stuff at his place. He doesn’t just hire the smart and the strong—he hires people with all sorts of weird skills. That country’s a box of surprises. You never know what’ll pop out. Wouldn’t surprise me if someone there could decipher this thing properly.”

“Ahh... It does feel that way sometimes, doesn’t it?” Mutsumi nodded. Her brother Ichiha’s talents blossomed there because that was the kind of country it was.

Fuuga rose from the throne and walked up to the Lunalith to touch the surface of it, which bore an inscription he couldn’t read.

“If we can only read fragments, it’d be a problem if Souma managed to decipher the whole thing. I’d rather just smash it...”

“Um, I’d really rather you didn’t... Please,” Anne said, a sense of urgency in her voice.

The Lunalith was a source of spiritual support for the believers. If

Fuuga were to destroy it, he risked damaging their faith, even when it came to those who worshiped him like Anne.

Fuuga laughed raucously, as if he'd understood that all along. "It was a joke. But if we leave it be, it may benefit Souma. He seems to have some good spies, after all. Right, Hashim?"

"Indeed," Hashim replied, putting his hands together in front of him as he nodded. "Souma does seem to have a rather talented group of operatives. We've organized the White Snakes, expanding and enhancing the spy group that once worked for the House of Chima, but they've been at this longer than we have, so we seem to be playing catch-up. While we are not openly hostile to the Kingdom of Friedonia, the battle between our agents is intensifying beneath the surface."

"Yeah... It'd be bad if they snuck into this castle and got a glimpse of the Lunalith. Let's seal it away somewhere where they can't get at it. Would that work?"

Anne bowed reverently in response to Fuuga's question.

"It will be done as the Holy King Fuuga commands. There is just one thing I want you to hear," she said, stroking the Lunalith gently. "Recently, the characters that indicate the lands of the north have appeared on the Lunalith frequently. That is the note of importance I wanted you to know."

"The lands of the north, huh? The Demon Lord's Domain..."

Anne's words had put a pensive look on Fuuga's face.

I've finally got things settled inside the country. I can use all the forces at my disposal freely now. And...the Maritime Alliance probably won't be able to turn me down. Their leader, Souma, must understand the importance of fully liberating the Demon Lord's Domain. If he and I work together, we can face the Demon Lord's Domain with the full power of mankind on this continent.

Fuuga sensed the time had come to resume mankind's war with the Demon Lord's Domain.

The times are going to be changing again in a big way! And you're coming with me, Souma!

A feral smile spread across Fuuga's face as he thought that.



One night, as I was enjoying a cup of coffee from the Spirit Kingdom in Yuriga's room after finishing work, she broached the issue.

"My brother's requesting a broadcast meeting with you, Souma."

Although we were married, in light of Yuriga's position, we were putting off nighttime marital relations until later. That said, it would be awkward to keep her at a distance. People would start prying about

it, so at the advice of Liscia and our new chamberlain Tomoe, I was spending time with Yuriga at night once a week.

Though, even if it was at night, all we were doing was drinking tea or coffee—and maybe a little alcohol—as we chatted. It was a valuable opportunity to get her opinion on the person this country needed to be most wary of: Fuuga.

Besides, it was hard to find time to just talk like this lately, so it was as relaxing for me as my tea parties with Juno, which we were still doing occasionally.

“I sense more trouble coming my way...” I said, looking obviously displeased.

“I’ll bet,” Yuriga replied with a shrug. “My brother wouldn’t be contacting us if he didn’t have something bothersome to force you into.”

“That’s surprisingly harsh.”

“Because that’s the truth of the matter... I mean, ’cause that’s the truth.”

Yuriga corrected herself. Since becoming my wife, she’s been making an effort to talk more casually. She didn’t want to be super formal and have people treat her like a foreign princess forever. That’s why she was trying to be frank with us, except at public functions, where there was a hierarchy to consider... She was still getting used to it though.

I’d have felt bad for her if I called attention to it, so I moved on.

“Fuuga destroyed Zem and took hold of the Orthodox Papal State. Which means...if he wants to talk about something, it’s likely about the Demon Lord’s Domain, huh?”

“Unless he’s declaring war on this country, I’m sure that will be it,” Yuriga said without hesitation.

The Maritime Alliance was the only force left that could oppose Fuuga’s Great Tiger Empire now, making me the only ruler who could contend with him. That meant everyone on the continent saw me as the person that Fuuga would eventually have to fight. I’d heard there were already drunks out there arguing over which of us would win. It’s good they were having fun, because I definitely wasn’t enjoying this...

Now that the Great Tiger Empire was united with one will, if Fuuga attacked our faction now, it would be hard to get him to back off by deploying troops from the entire Maritime Alliance like when we’d saved the Gran Chaos Empire. It would certainly crush their morale, but if he could just force the Kingdom of Friedonia to submit, he probably could take back any territory he lost elsewhere...

I sighed between sips of coffee.

“Well, Fuuga will want to take care of the threat to his rear before

starting an all-out war with us. He's a pretty cautious guy, all things considered."

"That's true. If there's going to be a fight, he'll want to be able to throw everything he has at you."

"What a nuisance. Seriously."

"Uh, sorry..."

"It's not your fault, Yuriga," I said, putting a hand on her dejected shoulders.

Then, the next day, I had my broadcast meeting with Fuuga.

"So, there you have it, Brother-in-Law. I want the Maritime Alliance's cooperation in completely liberating the Demon Lord's Domain."

"You can't just say 'there you have it.'"

During the meeting we were holding over the broadcast, Fuuga requested the Maritime Alliance participate in an operation to fully liberate the Demon Lord's Domain.

I pinched my temples, feeling an impending headache, and I said, "At its apex, the Empire suffered a major defeat against the Demon Lord's Domain, despite leading a united force of mankind's nations. We could face an unexpected situation. Furthermore, your Great Tiger Empire only just brought Zem and the Orthodox Papal State under your control. If you get tripped up here, it'll be a fatal blow to your country."

"I think so too, Brother," said Yuriga, who was standing beside me, displaying a position that was contrary to her brother's. "It's plain to see from outside the country. The only reason the Great Tiger Empire works as an empire is because of you and the prestige you hold. If you were to fail to take the Demon Lord's Domain, and that was to damage your prestige, the Great Tiger Empire would crumble."

"Is that your own opinion, Yuriga?"

"Yes. Souma's not making me say this; it's what I think myself."

"You've learned to speak for yourself, huh? I guess having a partner makes all the difference."

Fuuga smiled, pleased to see Yuriga's growth after she boldly argued against him.

"Brother!" Yuriga continued, perhaps feeling he wasn't taking her seriously, but Fuuga held up a hand to stop her.

"I get what you two are trying to say. But that prestige isn't something I can maintain for long. Right now, the world is balanced between my country and your faction. We're in a situation where I could have a stable reign, I'm sure. But peace makes people's dreams and ambitions rot away. If we don't act while mankind is able to unite against the Demon Lord's Domain, we'll be missing the opportunity.

We can only deal with the Demon Lord's Domain *now*, while mankind is longing to be freed from the threat of it."

I could understand where he was coming from. I agreed that if we were going to tackle the Demon Lord's Domain, now was the only time to do it. But the risks of failure were so high... When a ruler considered that his country might lose stability in battle or another way—stability that so many people had worked for—he would normally be more hesitant. Granted, maybe being able to kick aside that sort of normalcy was one of the prerequisites for becoming a great man.

"We'll head for the northernmost point on the continent by land. I want your Maritime Alliance to use the fleets you're so proud of to head there directly and stage a landing. We'll catch them in a pincer from the north and south."

"We don't know how deep the Demon Lord's Domain actually goes."

"That's part of why we're sending people. We can't just sit on our hands forever because we don't know."

"There are rumors of a demon lord or a demon god too."

"Just *rumors*. But if there is one, I'd like to have a go at him," Fuuga replied with a grin.

There was a vicious innocence in Fuuga's smile. *The man certainly is...pure, I suppose*. Pure in his idiocy. Pure in his greatness. Pure in his humanity.

"Obviously, even if you refuse, we'll try to liberate the Demon Lord's Domain with our own power."

Urg... *That would be the worst outcome*. The reason the Empire's united force had failed was due to starting a war without knowing much about the demons. They'd sent in a force that thought they were there to slay monsters like they were culling dangerous animals. The forces had no distinction between what was a monster and a demon, and they ended up at war with the demons. Through Tomoe's ability and her past experience, we knew that it was possible to communicate with demons.

If I left handling the Demon Lord's Domain entirely up to Fuuga, he'd attack even the demons we could negotiate with, and when they fought back, it might be a repeat of the last time. Should Fuuga lose, his country would split or fall apart, leaving the countries that couldn't handle the monster attacks to perish. That would create new refugees, putting pressure on the countries of the south. We'd be back in the same situation as the first year after I was summoned.

If I was going to stop it, I couldn't leave things entirely to Fuuga.

"When...are you planning to send troops?"

"Sir Souma?!" Yuriga cried out in shock.

I likely had an expression on my face like I'd bitten into something unpleasant. Fuuga didn't care about that though.

He told me, "The plan is to start in the 11th month of this year. The Demon Lord's Domain is a desert region in the far north. I figure, if we don't want our men to perish in the heat, we had better do it sometime after fall. The nights will be cold, but not unmanageable."

It wasn't happening immediately, we had more than half a year of lead time.

"Then don't do anything reckless until then. I want to gather information on the Demon Lord's Domain too. It would be pure folly to start a war without a plan. There may be records from past battles in Valois Castle in the Euphoria Kingdom."

"Hmm... You've got a point. Maybe I'll order a search through the former Imperial territories in my realm too."

"Listen. Avoid *any* rash actions until the day we send out our troops, Fuuga."

"Fine... Good working with you."

The broadcast cut out. I pressed a hand to my forehead as I stared up at the ceiling.

"Oh, jeez!"

"Souma..." Yuriga tugged on my shirt sleeve, her tone compassionate, but also meek because she felt guilty over her brother's selfish demands.

I patted her on the shoulder, trying to be reassuring, and then slapped my own cheeks to get myself going.

"There's no time. I've gotta do what I can. I'll need the other countries in the Maritime Alliance to help too. In particular, I'll need Hakuya to investigate what had happened around the time the united forces of mankind lost to the Demon Lord's Domain... We don't have time to waste, Yuriga."

"Okay!"

Yuriga and I left the room with the jewel, our resolve reaffirmed.



Chapter 6: Investigation

Some days later, I called a certain person to the governmental affairs office...

Liscia and I worked together for a while until there was a hesitant knock at the door.

“Excuse me.” A woman entered. “Did you call for me, Sir Souma?”

Standing on the other side of my desk, bowing her head slightly, was Ichiha’s elder sister, Sami Chima, who was now the librarian of the castle library. However, her duties as librarian were something I’d temporarily given her in order to ease the pain of the emotional wounds left by the political struggles of the Union of Eastern Nations. She wasn’t formally one of my retainers or anything.

I set down my pen and turned to Liscia, saying, “Let’s take a break. Ask Serina to prepare tea.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me, Madam Sami, we’ll have a seat over here.”

I headed over to the sofas with Liscia and Sami. Some time later, our maids Serina and Carla arrived with everything needed to prepare tea. I had them do so, and after a break, I got straight to business.

“I’ve called you here today because I have a favor to ask, Sami.”

“Hm? A favor?”

She looked blankly at me, inclining her head to one side.

I nodded. “This is regarding something I’d discussed with Hakuya recently...”



The other day, I told Hakuya about what had happened during my meeting with Fuuga.

Now that he’s married to Jeanne, he’s Hakuya Euphoria now, and also my brother-in-law due to my own marriage to Maria...

As I was thinking about that, Hakuya frowned, saying, “He’s made another troublesome request...”

“Yeah. But it’d probably be more dangerous for us if we let Fuuga go to the Demon Lord’s Domain alone.”

“He might suddenly cause an all-out war with the demons, after

all.”

Hakuya and I were already on the same page about the risks here.

“So, that’s why I want to gather as much information on the demons as we can between now and the 11th month. I’m thinking that digging up records from the officers who led the united forces in the former Gran Chaos Empire would be perfect for that. And the one best positioned to do so is...”

“The Euphoria Kingdom, yes? I agree. I will make a suggestion to Madam Jeanne and have her begin a formal investigation into it.”

“Thanks... Hold on, you’re married, and you’re still calling your wife *Madam Jeanne*?”

“We make a distinction between public and private settings,” Hakuya said nonchalantly.

I could see he was enjoying the newlywed life in their private time. I’d have loved to hear all about it, but Hakuya must have sensed the incoming teasing and opened his mouth first.

“In order to help things along, I have a request for you, sire.”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“As much as we’d love to investigate for you, many of our personnel here in the Euphoria Kingdom are occupied with moving over to the new systems in the wake of the country’s reorganization. In short, we don’t have enough people we can assign to the investigation.”

“Oh, yeah. I get that.”

The Kingdom of Friedonia was in a similar situation, after all...

“As such, I would like you to send people to handle the investigation,” Hakuya said.

“I see...”

Being able to swap people and supplies back and forth was one of the benefits of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Euphoria Kingdom moving to operate as a single nation. Sending Excel there to lead their fleet was part of this.

“So, who do you want?” I asked.

“Sir Ichiha, given he’s an expert on monsters...is what I’d like to say, but I doubt that’s possible.”

“You’re darn right it’s not. It’d be too much for this country to lose both its prime minister *and* his stand-in.”

“Then please give us Sir Ichiha’s elder sister, Madam Sami.”

“Sami? Sami Chima?” I asked, just to make sure I had the right person. Hakuya nodded.

“Yes. I helped her organize the library before, so I remember her. She has a high degree of ability when it comes to organizing and sorting materials. It likely comes from her academic interest in science and mathematics. There are those who might think a librarian needs

to be trained in literature, but sorting and organizing call for skill in science and mathematics.”

“Ooh... That kind of makes sense.”

I had specialized in literature and history, but hadn’t been very good at using software to sort through information. I’d heard that archaeology—where they’d systematized ways of sorting the countless chips, fragments of pottery, and stoneware they dealt with—was a lot closer to a science than people who studied historical documents.

“I don’t think there could be a better person to help us with this investigation.”

Since Hakuya said it so definitively, I was convinced he was right.



“So, there you have it. Do you think you could help us?”

I explained what had happened so far to Sami and asked for her assistance. While she might not have been my retainer, I did have custody of her, meaning I could force her to do it—but I didn’t want to be that heavy-handed when she was still recovering emotionally.

Liscia, who was standing next to me, added, “Obviously, you can refuse if you don’t want to do it. If having Ichiha nearby is helping you feel at peace, we can understand why you wouldn’t want to go to another country.”

“No... That’s fine,” Sami said before nodding silently. “He already has a fiancée. I wouldn’t want her to feel too constrained by her sister-in-law.”

“Don’t say that,” Liscia replied. “Tomoe and Ichiha aren’t bothered by you at all.”

Sami shook her head. “But it bothers me. I think...it’s time I face the future.”

“Madam Sami...”

“So I’ll take on this task,” Sami said, looking me straight in the eye.

It was like she was saying she was done hanging her head and letting the past tie her down.

“You’re okay with it?” I checked.

“Yes. I’m interested in the great library in Valois Castle too.”

“Ah ha ha. You sound like Hakuya.”

Maybe the great library in Valois Castle was the holy land for bibliophiles. If Sami liked the great library there, maybe she’d settle in at Valois even after her task there was done. She wasn’t officially attached to our country, so...if it happened, I wasn’t in any position to complain. I’d have to be happy that she’d found something new to live for.

“Well then, Madam Sami. I’m counting on you to gather

information on the Demon Lord's Domain... Try not to get so distracted by the great library that you neglect the investigation, okay?"

"Yes. I'll be careful not to."

I exchanged a firm handshake with Sami.



—One week later—

"Welcome to the Euphoria Kingdom, Madam Sami."

Jeanne and Hakuya greeted Sami as she disembarked from a Friedonian royal gondola that had landed in the courtyard of Valois Castle.

Sami hurriedly bowed as she suddenly found herself in front of the royal couple. "Um, thank you for having me, Lady Jeanne, Sir Hakuya."

"Oh, don't thank us. We're the ones who should be grateful you came. Right, Sir Hakuya?"

"Yes. I think we can have high hopes for Madam Sami's ability to sort through information."

"Y-You're too kind..."

Sami shrank into herself a little, feeling awkward at the compliments. She generally was an indoorsy type who'd only really talked with her twin Yomi.

Hakuya smiled wryly at her reaction before raising his hand to give a signal. When he did, a line of bureaucrats formed behind Hakuya and Jeanne.

Sami blinked in confusion. Hakuya smiled faintly before explaining, "We will be loaning you some of our country's bureaucrats. These fifteen have been told to do as you command. Please, use them as if they were your own hands and feet."

"If you need anything else, just say the word. I'll lend you all the help I can as queen of this country," Jeanne said, causing Sami to shrink a little more.

"Y-You're too kind..." she murmured.

Seeing this, Jeanne said, "Now, I'm told you're here to gather records concerning the Demon Lord's Domain, and to ask about the memories of soldiers who'd been deployed there. Is that right?"

"Y-Yes. That's correct."

"I see. I'm sure you can easily split the workload with the bureaucrats when it comes to going through the records, but interviewing soldiers about their memories from the campaign may be difficult for you all to handle alone. Some of those retired soldiers can be real ruffians, after all."

"Th-They can?"

Oh... Collecting memories means having to sit down with those sorts of burly men, does it? Sami thought, which hadn't occurred to her before.

Sami was a famous mage in the Union of Eastern Nations, so if it came to it, she knew magic that could blow a dozen big men away all at once, but...that didn't mean she wasn't uneasy about them. Sami and Yomi, who hated their warrior brothers Nata and Gauche, had always gotten on poorly with soldier types. Warriors who had a relaxed personality like her adoptive father, Heinrant, were a rarity. If possible, Sami didn't want to be alone with burly men.

"Hee hee, don't you worry," Jeanne said, clapping Sami on the shoulder with a look of understanding. "I thought this might come up, so I've prepared a bodyguard for you. Come over here."

At Jeanne's beckoning, a large man in armor made his way between the bureaucrats. His full mail clanked with each step he took, but his steps didn't sound heavy. He also didn't give off a feeling of self-importance. The man stood tall beside Jeanne, snapping his hand to the side of his head in a salute.

"You called, Your Majesty?"

"Indeed. Let me introduce you, Madam Sami. This is General Gunther Lyle."

"Call me Gunther," the man Jeanne had introduced said, lowering his hand and bowing to Sami.

He had a large stature while Sami was on the petite side, so he felt big to her even with his head bowed. When Gunther raised his head, she came face-to-face with his imposing visage. His face was scary at first glance, but on closer inspection, his expression was a little tense, perhaps because he was meeting her for the first time. He was likely unsociable, the type who got nervous meeting people. Sami, who tended to be shy herself, felt a certain sympathy for him.

"Ah— I'm Sami. It's nice to meet you, Sir Gunther."

It took a moment for him to reply, "As it is to meet you, Madam Sami."

The two exchanged an awkward handshake.

Jeanne said, "With General Gunther at your side, those rough-and-tumble ex-soldiers wouldn't dare look down on you. General Gunther, I'm counting on you to look out for Madam Sami."

"I ask this of you as well, General," Hakuya added.

"It will be done, Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness."

Gunther saluted in response to Jeanne and Hakuya's request. He looked akin to a big dog or a friendly horse to Sami.

And so, this odd couple's search for information on the Demon Lord's Domain began.

"Wow..."

Sami let out a wide-eyed sigh of admiration as she first witnessed the great library inside Valois Castle.

The library in Parnam Castle had been like a forest of books, the innumerable volumes it housed making it the stuff of bibliophiles' dreams, but the great library of Valois Castle was even better. This place was a genuine forest of books—an untamed jungle, one so fantastical she wouldn't have been surprised to find unicorns in. The size of the collection was impressive, and the design and decorations of the room were so stylish. The carpets were thick and soft, there were spiral stairs to the upper levels, and paintings on the walls.

Perhaps because Souma and Hakuya were so utilitarian, the library in Parnam Castle had worked on growing its catalog and organizing it systematically. It was functional, but not stylish. In contrast, the great library in Valois Castle exuded elegance, as if to say that the only action with any merit in a person's life was reading books.

You could tell it was the library of the once greatest nation on the continent.

Sami was overwhelmed for a moment, but...

"Ahem!"

"Ah!"

Sami jumped a little as Gunther cleared his throat, bringing her back to reality.

Oh, right. I have a mission to accomplish. Sami turned to the gaggle of bureaucrats behind Gunther and said, "First, I'd like you to gather official records from around the time of your invasion of the Demon Lord's Domain."

"They've already been prepared for you. This way, please," one bureaucrat responded before leading the way.

Did Hakuya already give them some instructions? He's always so well prepared... Sami thought as she followed the bureaucrat to a single table.

"Huh?" Sami looked at the table with blank amazement. There was only one book, and maybe twenty to thirty pages of reports on it. Hesitantly, she asked, "This is really all we have?"

With an apologetic bow, the bureaucrat said, "Yes... We searched all over the great library, but these were the only official records we could find."

"There are no other records? But the destruction of the combined forces of mankind inside the Demon Lord's Domain was a major debacle, wasn't it?"

"Yes. We suspect that may be why there aren't many records..."

It seemed the higher-ups in the Imperial government of the time were afraid of being held responsible after cheerleading a campaign

that led to such a massive defeat, so they hadn't been eager to keep records of it. On top of that, Maria's father, who was emperor at the time, was rendered bedridden with despair over the many lives lost and passed away not long after. Maria ascended the throne following this, and used her natural charisma to advance the Mankind Declaration. This caused the chaos inside the country to subside, but there likely weren't the resources to keep detailed records.

Sami gazed up to the ceiling.

"Rulers are always like this..."

History is written by the victors of the next era.

If you look at the history of Souma's world, the Han Chinese—like the Romans—left behind many records. However, Chen Shou had written the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* under the Jin Dynasty in the following era. The task of making records of a defeated government is the job of the government that defeats them. Naturally, that means events are often twisted in ways that are politically advantageous to that new government.

In order to secure the legitimacy of the current government, the rulers of the previous governments are often depicted as tyrants to a degree, where it was only natural they should have been destroyed. They do this without taking into consideration the country's situation in that earlier era. This is a wall that you are guaranteed to encounter in historical studies.

It was the same in this world.

"Is something the matter?" Gunther asked hesitantly.

Sami slapped her own cheeks in an attempt to change gears. Then she turned back to the bureaucrats.

"If we can't rely on official records, then so be it. Let's gather private records," she said. "There may be mentions of it in diaries and letters from the time. Hopefully, we'll find letters conferring honors for actions taken in the Demon Lord's Domain, or perhaps reporting damages and requesting assistance..."

"But won't those tend to exaggerate the facts?" one of the bureaucrats asked. "Such as saying they killed far more monsters than they actually did, or inflating the damage inflicted by a demon attack in order to demand compensation."

"That's true." Sami nodded. "We'll need to make up for that with numbers. If there are many similar reports of monsters or demons, that makes it more likely they reflect the reality of the situation."

"I see. Understood."

Gathering and sorting through information to get a look at the big picture—this was exactly what Hakuya had hoped Sami would excel

at.

“Will you be involved in gathering private records too, Madam Sami?” Gunther asked.

Sami shook her head. “Let’s leave that to the bureaucrats. We’ll go meet with the people who actually participated in the combined force and hear their stories.”

“Understood. Please, follow me then.” Gunther nodded and began walking.

Sami tottered along after him. Despite starting a little slower, she soon caught up. It seemed he was matching her stride and walking at a relaxed pace. If he’d walked at the normal gait of a man of his height, Sami would’ve had to jog to keep up.

His awkward kindness reminded her of her adoptive father, Heinrant, in a way. Though Heinrant was always all smiles, while Gunther had a scary face and was hard to read.

Maybe deep down...they’re both kind in the same way? Sami thought as she followed Gunther.

The two of them boarded a carriage. Apparently, the ex-soldier they were interviewing lived in the castle town.

“I had expected it would be someone in the military,” Sami said, but Gunther shook his head quietly.

“I hear that those on the front lines were nearly annihilated. It must have been hell. Anyone who managed to make it back has emotional scars. Those linger, even after the physical ones heal...”

“And those emotional scars were bad enough that they couldn’t keep serving in the military... Is that it?”

When Sami lived in the Duchy of Chima, she had seen people so badly scarred by the demon wave that they were always worried monsters might attack them at any time. Emotional scars were difficult to heal. Sami knew this all too well, having not fully recovered from losing her adoptive father herself.

“Talking about this means dredging up painful memories... It’s an incredibly cruel thing to do to a person,” Sami said, a hint of self-derision in her tone as she reflected on her position.

“And yet, do it we must...”

“Sir Gunther?”

“In order to prevent repeating past mistakes, we must learn the lessons of our predecessors and put them to use. That is our duty. I am here, serving as your shield because I believe it will be vital to this country’s future.”

That was a lot of words coming from the usually taciturn Gunther. He must have been trying to comfort Sami.

He’s awkward, but truly kind, Sami thought.

“Thank you, Sir Gunther.”

“A mushroom?”

The carriage had stopped in front of an inn and tavern, the owner of which was apparently the ex-soldier they were looking for.

Standing at the bar was the other, who scowled when they asked him about his memories of the campaign. But when he heard it was an important request from the new queen, Jeanne, he'd reluctantly started to talk.

“Yeah...one the size of a mountain. We were making good progress across the Demon Lord's Domain, wiping out monsters as we went, when it appeared. Though, I don't know if it really was a mushroom. It was just shaped like one.”

“I... I see...”

Sami and Gunther stared at him wide-eyed, not knowing what kind of expression they should make in response. The owner laughed at himself a bit when he saw their reaction.

“No one ever believed me though. I've even been told I must've been so disoriented that I started seeing things. But I know I saw it. That massive mushroom came towards us, making the ground shake under it, and crushed man and horse alike. And after that...”

“After that?”

“After that...the inside of it shone, and then a moment later, there was a blinding flash of light... My comrades, everything, all in an instant... Ngh!”

The owner clutched his head and groaned. It must have been painful to remember.

“It all vanished. But I'll never forget that smell. The scent of burnt meat...hanging in the hot air... Urgh...ghh...”

“Um, I think that's enough. Thank you for your valued opinion.”

“Ugh...”

Seeing the way the owner was clutching his head, Sami and Gunther gave up on getting anything more out of him.

Was there something in the Demon Lord's Domain that had tormented people so badly that it lingered in their memories even now? Sami wondered what the massive mushroom he had spoken of might be.

Gathering and sorting through information—these are the fundamental tasks of all research.

If enough “hazy” or “worthless” facts can be arranged into a single group, it may lead to the discovery of a principle or truth. In that sense, you could say a researcher is someone who sorts through the data they gather, which may not appear that valuable, in order to find hidden treasure.

Consider the boom of “reborn in another world” novels in Souma's

old world. Imagine gathering as many as possible and thoroughly categorizing them.

Is the protagonist sent to the other world through reincarnation or transportation? Alone or in a group? Do they gain abilities, and are those abilities powerful or weak? Are there gender differences? Do they turn into another race? What is the world they are sent to like? And so on. By thoroughly categorizing them, sorting the information into charts and graphs, and comparing the results with trends in society at the time, you might achieve some insight into the writers or the readers of such works and how they have changed over time.

Value can be found in anything. It might even be said that gathering and sorting are the keys that allow any phenomenon in existence to be a subject of research.

And Sami Chima was a specialist in both.

“Divide eyewitness reports of monsters from eyewitness reports of demons,” Sami commanded.

Having expanded their search for reports of monsters and demons from just official documents to private ones such as letters, they were confronted with a mountain of paper.

“That said, even a specialist like Ichiha can’t perfectly distinguish between demons and monsters. And these are the imprecise recollections of people that we’re going off of too. For now, we will define a demon as those that use tools and language. You’ll be categorizing them into monsters and demons based on the presence or absence of sapience. I’m counting on you people.”

“““Yes, ma’am.”””

The bureaucrats all started moving on Sami’s orders. The people who had supported the former Empire could sort documents quickly and efficiently so long as they had clear instructions.

Meanwhile, Sami was looking through the papers detailing the interviews they’d had with ex-soldiers.

“Does it bother you still?” Gunther asked and Sami nodded.

“Many of the ex-soldiers mentioned an enormous mushroom. Its existence is hinted at in the few official documents we have, and there is also the armored giant mentioned in rumors...the demon god. These two seem bizarre and out of place.”

“There are quite a number of accounts of them though.”

“Right. Which is why I’m thinking they probably exist, but...” Sami rested her cheek on her palm and sighed. “I can’t decide if an enormous mushroom and an armored giant are classified as monsters or demons. It’s hard to imagine a mushroom moving around, and the giants seem more likely to be demons, but Ichiha’s monster identification system assumes monsters are warped in some way. And

a humanoid seemingly that gigantic is way too warped.”

“It satisfies the conditions for being monsters then.”

“Yeah. But if it’s really wearing armor, that shows it’s sapient.”

“You said to categorize those with sapience as demons.”

“I don’t even know where to put it. Some of the reports even say it flew.”

Sami groaned as she stretched herself out over the table. Gunther picked up one page and looked over it.

“Monsters are warped to begin with. Could it just be that some are like that?”

“If we say that, I feel like our investigation loses all meaning...”

“If I had gone on the campaign, I could have been more helpful—but I was just a fresh recruit back then, left behind to defend the home front. It still eats at me.”

“If you’d gone, you might have died.”

“I suppose I might.” Gunther looked at the reports of the armored giant as they talked. “Could it be that this giant is the one they call Demon Lord Divalroi?”

“It’s not impossible, but...that’s something I’m curious about too.” Sami picked up a number of reports. “I used to think that the Demon Lord’s name was Divalroi, but after investigating the reports, it’s inconsistent. Different soldiers heard different things, such as Deeroy, Valloid, and Dilroma.”

“Hmm... We don’t even know if Divalroi is the right name then?”

“It’s hard to make out words in a different language. You can’t blame them for mishearing.”

For instance, in Japanese, Machiavelli might be rendered as Makyaberri, Makiaverri, Makkyaberi, Makkiaberri, and so on, depending on which book you’re reading and when it was published. They have to fit Italian words into Japanese phonetics, so it’s natural for the way that’s done to change depending on who’s doing it. It was possible the same thing was happening with Divalroi.

Seeing the troubled look on Gunther’s face, Sami shrugged.

“There’s no point dwelling on questions we can’t solve. We should set aside Divalroi for now and quickly gather material on monsters and demons.”

“Yes, that makes sense... What about the mushroom and the giant?”

“I can’t see us coming up with answers to either of those now, but...” Sami smiled a little. “I have a reliable little brother. Let’s have him decide.”



“So there you have it, Ichiha.”

“You can’t just say ‘there you have it,’ Big Sister.” Ichiha sighed on the other side of the broadcast, exhaustion clear on his face.

Having received permission from Queen Jeanne to use the jewel, Sami and Gunther were now having a broadcast call with Ichiha who was in the Kingdom of Friedonia.

“The Empire isn’t our only source for information. We’re asking all the countries in the Maritime Alliance that took part in the combined force, and Yuriga’s getting the Great Tiger Empire to send us info too. My hands are full sorting through all of that... Are you really going to dump this on me too?”

It sounded like he was busy. He’d been gathering information on monsters on the side ever since he took over the role of acting prime minister, so he had to have a lot on his plate. That much was plain to see.

But Sami was Ichiha’s big sister. And big sisters have a history of not being fair to their little brothers.

“We need you to give it your best as an expert in monsterology,” Sami said with a smile, causing Ichiha’s shoulders to slump.

“I get that... Still, it hurts not having Mr. Hakuya around anymore. I’m using my connections, like the former chairman of MonSoc at the Academy, to help bring in more people, but...”

“Hee hee, you’re getting some use out of the time you spent at school, I see.”

“It’s nothing to laugh about. Everyone is coming to help despite having their own positions to consider.”

Incidentally, “the former chairman of MonSoc” refers to the former chairman of the Monster Research Society, the person who assisted Ichiha and Hakuya during the Monsterology Symposium in the capital. After graduation, he was passionately wooed by a young noblewoman, Sara, who’d had her eye on him while they were at the Academy, and married into her family.

It turned out that Sara had been told by her folks to find someone who would be up to the Souma’s personnel standards, and she’d been after the former chairman all along. She was a super girl who had supported him in school, backed his research after graduation, seduced him with love and gratitude, and now had already blessed him with a child.

Ichiha scrutinized the information he had with the help of his old research colleagues, including the former chairman and his wife Sara.

“I’ll send you a messenger kui when we finish sorting through the remaining information on monsters and demons in this country,” Sami

said.

“I’m both grateful and really not. It’s a weird feeling.”

“The bigger issue is the things that don’t seem to be monsters or demons.”

“The mushroom and the giant you mentioned, right, Big Sister?” Ichiha said, looking serious. “I don’t know about the giant either, but I really don’t get the mushroom. It’s enormous, it moves, and it crushes people. Then it releases light, and burns them to death...”

“Do you think there’s a monster like that?”

“I can’t say categorically that there isn’t, but I’ve never heard of any like that. If it’s a monster, it needs legs or tentacles to move, and if it spits fire, it needs some sort of internal organ that can produce flames. It seems impossible for a monster—at least, as we understand them now—to do that while shaped like a mushroom. And I can’t imagine a being that warped having sapience, so it’s hard to imagine it’s a demon either.”

“Then...you don’t think this mushroom-shaped monster exists, Ichiha?”

“No, if there are a lot of eyewitness reports, it may. But it’s possible it’s neither a monster nor a demon.”

“Hm? What do you mean?” Sami asked, cocking her head to the side. Ichiha’s expression grew grim.

“I suspect it might be a weapon the demons use.”

“Ah...! I see.”

Sami got what Ichiha was trying to say. It was plausible that a weapon might come in a mysterious form that could be confused for a monster.

Trebuchets had a form that might look like a massive sauropod, the Euphoria Kingdom had rhinosaurs that carried cannons, and there was Mechadra in Genia’s dungeon laboratory. If someone who didn’t know any better saw these things, they could be excused for thinking they were some new type of monster.

“There’s also the massive cube His Majesty encountered in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. If we assume that products similar to what Madam Genia studies in overscience lie sleeping in the Demon Lord’s Domain...”

“Then a massive mushroom weapon doesn’t sound so unusual,” Sami concluded for him. Ichiha nodded.

“I’ll need to report this to His Majesty.”

“Yes, you will... You can do it, Ichiha,” Sami said, showing him a clenched fist.

Ichiha’s eyes widened at how she made it sound like it wasn’t her problem.

“Huh? You’re not going to help me?”

“I couldn’t. I plan to stay here in this country, after all,” Sami said, shaking her head. “I fell in love with the great library at first sight. I want to work here.”

“R-Right... Well, you’re not one of our retainers, so you’re free to do as you like, but I feel like you didn’t have to decide that right this second...” Ichiha said resentfully, earning a chuckle from Sami.

“Once I saw the great library, I couldn’t resist. It’s okay. I’ll keep gathering information for you here in this country. You can let Sir Souma know that.”

“Okay...”

Seeing her mind was firmly made up, and happy to see her more positive about her future, Ichiha realized he should be supportive and accepted her decision.

Then, turning to Gunther, who had been watching them, he said, “Sir Gunther. My sister can be a handful, but please look after her.”

“Understood.”

The general was a taciturn man, and because of that, the sincerity of his response was apparent. Beside him, Sami wore a peaceful smile. Ichiha was relieved to see the two of them like that.



Chapter 7: Unsettling Signs

—One day in the 7th month, 1553rd year, Continental Calendar—
It had already been several months since we sent the research team to the Euphoria Kingdom.

On this hot day, following a series of hot days, I received a message from Ichiha reporting he'd finished summarizing the data we'd collected on monsters and demons. I gathered eight people in the meeting room: five of my wives, Liscia, Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Yuriga; Tomoe the Wise Wolf Princess, who had now become our chamberlain; Acting Prime Minister Ichiha; and finally, Julius the White General.

I had gathered people with knowledge in a variety of fields, but with Hakuya no longer among us, this had totally turned into a family meeting. Yuriga was one of my wives (even if her current position was kind of iffy), Tomoe was my honorary little sister, Ichiha was her fiancé, and Julius was my brother-in-law. Considering the season, it felt like the relatives were all getting together for the Obon holiday.

Incidentally, my other two wives, Naden and Maria, were away. Maria was out doing her usual charity work, and Naden was flying her around. Maria was a powerful woman now that she'd been set free from her responsibilities as empress. They used to say the best kind of husband was one who's healthy and out of the house, but in our family, it was the opposite... But I digress.

"All right, Ichiha. Get right to it."

"Okay. Understood."

Ichiha passed around handouts to everyone. Aisha, who had dumped all her stats into being a warrior, grimaced the moment she saw written materials. She wasn't illiterate, but she said anything complicated made her head hurt. Ichiha ignored her as he headed back to his seat and started explaining.

"With the help of Prime Minister Hakuya and my sister Sami in the Euphoria Kingdom, we've been able to learn about a number of the demons in the Demon Lord's Domain. My monster identification system uses the warped nature of monsters to identify them by individual parts. My sister Sami has turned that around. She is

identifying anything in the witness reports that don't seem warped as a demon."

Ichihai flipped through his handout, and we turned to the same page.

"The most sighted demons were ogres, orcs, kobitos, and a devil-like humanoid race with bat wings."

"Mr. Kobold..." Tomoe's face darkened.

It seemed she had trouble lumping the man who saved her in with the demons.

Incidentally, Julius and Yuriga had already been told Tomoe's story. Everyone here shared a view of monsters and demons based on the Dungeon Origin of Life Theory proposed by Genia.

"Are the bat-winged demons different from dragonewts like Madam Carla?" Aisha raised her hand and asked.

Oh, yeah, the dragonewts' wings are kinda bat-like, huh? If you weren't aware of dragons and wyverns, it would be a reasonable mistake to assume they were bat wings.

Ichihai shook his head. "If they were dragonewts, the reports would say there were dragonewts. But the only thing they say is that they had bat wings. It seems probable that the witnesses imagined them as being similar to devils in our fairy tales."

"Yeah," I agreed. "They would think that, huh?"

If you just stuck a pair of bat wings on a person, they'd look like a devil, a gargoyle, or maybe a vampire. As far as I was concerned, if elves existed, vampires weren't that far-fetched. They were both fairy tales in my mind.

Next Juna raised her hand. "You mentioned ogres. Would they be different from the ones that we saw at the dungeon in the Republic?"

"Oh, those *gorilla* ogres, huh?"

"Gorilla ogres?" Liscia, who'd stayed home that time, cocked her head to the side.

It seemed the word gorilla hadn't translated for her, but when I explained that they were buff, four-limbed creatures that resembled Old Man Owen, the light went out of her eyes.

"They sound...insufferable."

"I know, right? Even for ogres, those ones were completely warped."

"Yes, that's right," Juna agreed. "Those ogres didn't seem like they could be sapient."

Ichihai flipped through the papers. "According to the contact reports, they weren't warped in that way. They were just large, red-skinned humanoids with horns on their foreheads."

"Horns, huh... Do ya mean like the kind that Big Sis Cia grows when she's givin' someone an earful?"

When Roroo said that, Liscia slammed her hands down on the table and leapt to her feet.

“Hey, Roroo! What is that supposed to mean?!”

“Nya ha ha, yeah, that’s it! That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Roroo said, putting her fingers beside her temples to mimic horns.

Yeah, sometimes I feel like Liscia grows horns when she’s lecturing me too...

“Hey, Souma? You aren’t thinking anything rude, are you?”

“Huh?! No, not at all...”

Liscia gave me the stink eye, having read my mind, so I averted my eyes.

“The Dungeon Origin of Life Theory, was it?” Julius said, stroking his chin with a thoughtful expression on his face. “The idea that the various races of mankind, as well as animals, may have originally been born in dungeons... That was Genia M. Arcs’s idea, wasn’t it? And Souma’s theory was that there may have been a malfunction in those dungeons, and monsters are the failed outcome, yes?”

“Hm? Yeah, that’s right,” I said. *I did come up with that during the Monsterology Symposium, huh?*

The dungeons in the nations of mankind now spat out monsters, so the same malfunction could be affecting the ones in the Demon Lord’s Domain. If demons saw the monsters as something the dungeons just produced on their own, the same way we did, monsters and demons might be opposed to one another. The theory that had come to mind when I considered that monsters and demons might be different.

“In that case,” Julius continued, “if they are failures produced by malfunctioning dungeons, do the dungeons have something they were originally trying to produce? If humanlike monsters are failures, then what are demon-like monsters failures of?”

“Oh! I see! We can work backwards from the failed product!” Ichiha’s eyes widened.

“What do you mean?” Tomoe asked, tilting her head.

Ichiha pulled out a pen and drew the gorilla ogre we had seen in the Republic alongside an ordinary ogre on the back of one of the reports.

“The only thing that divides monsters from demons is how warped they are as living creatures. If the warped ogres that His Majesty saw were monsters, then those might have originally been meant to turn out like these more humanlike ogres that were seen deep in the Demon Lord’s Domain. To borrow an expression from His Majesty, the gorilla ogres are failed ogres.”

It makes sense. So, the original function of the dungeon had been to make ogres similar to humans, but after many long years, it broke down

and started putting out dumb monsters with swollen upper bodies that walked on all fours?

Ichiha put a finger to his lips as he thought.

“That relationship probably doesn’t just apply to ogres. There are monsters called zombies—which are like rotting people, and skeletons—which move despite being nothing but bones. I can imagine they were created in a failed attempt to make humans.”

“Turning that around, could there not also be complete versions of the monsters that resemble people?” Julius said, building on Ichiha’s explanation. “The Kingdom of Lastania was attacked by lizardmen during the demon wave. If we were to assume those monsters with humanoid bodies were somewhat social creatures and had a more complete version of their race that isn’t found in the nations of mankind, then...”

“Then it might be out there as one of the demon races, huh?” I finished for him.

“Your view is that the demons are races that had been previously undiscovered on this continent, right, Souma?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“So, would the complete lizardman be...a dragonewt, maybe?” Roroa asked, crossing her arms in thought.

“No.” Ichiha shook his head. “I studied the lizardman remains we brought back. The parts of its body were different from those of a dragonewt’s. Even if they had been completed, they wouldn’t have been dragonewts.”

If anything, they’d have been dinosaur people, not half-dragon people. In my head, I imagined a drawing from a science magazine I’d read that had a feature on what dinosaurs might have looked like if they hadn’t gone extinct and evolved to be like humans, as well as Banho the Dragon Knight from one of the *Doraemon* movies. *Are there undiscovered races like that in the Demon Lord’s Domain?*

As I thought about it, that stirred up my spirit of adventure.

“Anyway, if there are monsters that resemble people, I think it’s interesting to work backwards from that and imagine what humans or demons they might have been meant to be. I’d like to borrow the help of my sister Sami in the Euphoria Kingdom and the other monster researchers to look into it,” Ichiha said.

We all nodded in agreement.

Just as we had decided on a direction for our investigation into the demons, the doors to the meeting room swung open violently with a loud *bang*.

“We’re home!”

“I’m tired...”

There at the door stood an energetic Maria and an exhausted Naden. They'd returned after their charity work.

"Welcome home, you two," I greeted them. "Where did you head off to this time?"

"We were looking out west for a suitable place for a school," Maria said, taking a seat at the round table. "It seems the big bridge over the river northeast of Lagoon City has collapsed due to age and strong winds. That's interrupting travel between the coastal cities north and south of the bridge, so please send a team to repair it."

"Hm? But we haven't received a report about that."

"That's because I came straight back after hearing about it from the locals," Maria explained, to which Ichiha nodded.

"Reports like that go to the local lord first, and then they request assistance from the capital if necessary, so it tends to take some time. I'm sure we'll receive the request sometime tomorrow."

That made sense. *Come to think of it, we were able to act swiftly when calamity struck the God-Protected Forest because Aisha received word from her father and I happened to be there with a unit of military engineers from the Forbidden Army nearby.* If we had to go through the official process for requesting aid, it would have taken us longer to arrive at the forest. Because of what happened, we'd set up a system to allow immediate contact in case of an emergency. But when their lives weren't at stake like now, it was a lower priority and could take a while. *That's something I need to work on... But first...*

"Got it. Ichiha, have the military engineers prepare so we'll be able to send them out immediately."

"As you command, sire."

"Good... Now, why are you looking so tuckered out?" I asked Naden.

She had buried her head in her arms on the round table as soon as she was seated.

Naden looked up and sighed. "When it comes to schools, you have to listen to the parents' opinions, right? Well, I was forced to look after all the kids while Maria did that."

"Hee hee. No matter where we go, Naden's always a hit with the children," Maria said cheerfully. Naden was a ryou, which made her somewhat special. Out of all my wives though, she was the most like a girl from my old world. Naden could interact with people, unrestrained by rank or status, instead looking at things from the perspective of whoever she was dealing with. And she was quite a hit with the townsfolk here in the capital too.

"Would you like to try going on an educational program? Like *Together With Big Sister*, maybe?" I suggested.

"Oh, that would be nice. Will you come sing and dance with me?"

Juna said, clapping her hands.

“Give me a break...” Naden replied before burying her head again.

Maria, who had been watching Naden with a smile, noticed the documents on the table.

“What are you all talking about now?” she asked.

“Monsters and demons. Also, a mushroom and a giant?” Liscia explained with a sigh. Maria cocked her head to the side.

“I’m not sure what you might mean by the latter two?”

“We received materials from the investigation team we dispatched to the Euphoria Kingdom, including witness testimony from the campaign. So we were discussing how some of the things they saw didn’t seem like monsters or demons.”

“Ahh, and those would be the mushroom and giant.” Maria picked up a copy of the materials. “Hmm. I’d heard of the giant myself. Something about a sparkling giant wearing full mail, flying through the sky... But this mushroom is new to me.”

“Is it?” Liscia asked.

“My father was emperor then, and I was only ten years old, but... Oh!” Maria pressed a finger to her lips, seeming to realize something. “After returning from the Demon Lord’s Domain, Father said something as he was bedridden with guilt over all the men he lost.”

“Hm?! What was it?!” I asked, causing Maria to pinch her temples as she tried desperately to remember.

“I think it was... Right, tracks. They said they saw tracks.”

“Tracks? Like...from the wheels of a carriage?”

“Yes. But said they were apparently wide and deep, almost like an empty moat or a dried-up river. And parts of horses and men were scattered in the bottom, crushed to the point they were no longer recognizable...”

“““Yikes...””” Everyone cringed a little as they imagined that.

Tracks that looked like a dried-up river, huh? If they were made by wheels, how large were they? And the wheels supposedly were massive enough to make mincemeat out of the men and horses they’d rolled over.

“If there’s one possibility...it’s that those tracks were left by the gigantic mushroom monster,” Ichiha said, causing Tomoe to cock her head to the side.

“What do you mean, Ichiha?”

“Well, we had witnesses saying that the mushroom-shaped monster shook the earth as it crushed people underneath it, right? If it left tracks, not footsteps, we can assume it moves on wheels or something similar. If it looked like it had wheels, I’m sure no one would identify it as a giant. In that case, I was thinking this might have been the mushroom.”

“That makes sense,” I agreed. “If you’re right, then we can probably assume it’s some kind of weapon.”

“Yeah.” Liscia nodded. “Maybe it’s similar to the land battleship *Albert*, which Souma used in the Battle of Red Dragon City. That left tracks behind it, and could have crushed people too, right?”

Ohh, that. I guess someone could have done something similar, yeah.

“But...we used it as a fixed platform for cannons in the Battle of Red Dragon City, so we didn’t go around running people over. And we’d just stuck some wheels on it to force it on land, so it wouldn’t have been able to handle much abuse. I mean, we did have to retire the original *Albert* after the war.”

“Hmm,” Julius grunted. “Does this mean the demons have a land battleship that can move about freely?”

“If they do, it’s going to be trouble...”

At that point, it would be more of a tank than a battleship. If it really was a tank, considering the size of the tracks, it would have to be even larger than monster tanks like the *Ratte* or the *Monster*, neither of which ever went past the planning stage.

“I’d really rather avoid fighting those kinds of monstrous weapons,” I muttered, and everyone nodded in unison.

“If it leaves tracks, it’s a land-based weapon, right? Fuuga’s forces are the ones taking the land route...” Liscia said with a sigh, but I shook my head.

“No, we also have the flying giant to worry about. If they can make a weapon like this, the giant is likely just as difficult to handle. If it can fly, it could appear at sea, after all.”

“Good point...”

“Yuriga, could you pass this info to Fuuga? Although, I know it won’t change his plans.”

“Okay... I agree with you.” Yuriga nodded, her shoulders slumping. He wasn’t one for listening to others, after all.

With that, we decided to call it a day and continue our preparations working under the assumption that the mushroom was some kind of weapon used by the demons. Once everyone but Liscia, Aisha, Naden, and Maria had returned to their duties, Naden jumped on my back.

“Ah! Hey, cut that out, Naden.”

“It’s my day, isn’t it? I’m tired, so be nice to me.”

“Hee hee, you certainly look exhausted. Be good to her, Souma,” Liscia said, smiling wryly.

What they were saying was reasonable, so I gave Naden a pat on the head. She purred, clearly not minding the gesture.

Then Maria raised her hand. “Tomorrow is my day, don’t forget.

Let's do all the lovey-dovey things newlyweds do."

"Oh, come on. You're the one who's been gallivanting around when we just got married, aren't you?"

"Heh heh, being with you gives me the energy to run around like that," she said, smiling.

"Does it now..."

I couldn't argue with such a flawless smile.

But a mushroom-shaped weapon, huh? The moment I decided to deal with the Demon Lord's Domain, there was nothing but fuel for my uncertainty. I had to do whatever I could to prepare, even if it seemed useless. There wasn't any other choice.



The two-pronged attack on the Demon Lord's Domain from land and sea was planned for the 11th month. Up until then, the nations of the Maritime Alliance and the Great Tiger Empire of Haan, the largest nation on the continent, both worked on expanding their militaries and strengthening their administrations. During that period, the Great Tiger Empire of Haan carried out a strategy of actively propagandizing their people using jewel broadcasts.

"Finally, the time to settle things with the Demon Lord's Domain is at hand!"

This was one such broadcast to the people before the offensive in the 11th month. While they obviously didn't state clear objectives, they did say there would be a major operation in the near future. This broadcast had the desired effect, and Fuuga's supporters were excited by the looming battle between their great man and the Demon Lord.

At the same time, this broadcast strategy served as a check against us who were supposed to be acting in conjunction with them. If we slacked off or delayed dispatching our forces, Fuuga and his people would decry us as traitors. Fuuga's broadcasts didn't play in the Maritime Alliance, but merchants and travelers brought word into our country, so there were people in our lands with great expectations for the results of the coming battle too.

That said, we couldn't quash those hopes.

It had been decided we were going to the Demon Lord's Domain with Fuuga's forces, so trying to shut those expectations down would only damage morale, and confuse the populace. Even if I knew what they were up to, I had no tricks to avoid it. Hashim had pulled one over on us.

And so...the time of preparation drew to an end.

—Beginning of the 10th month, 1553rd year, Continental

Calendar—

“All right, Souma. The time has come.”

Fuuga wasted little time with pleasantries before getting right into it on our broadcast call.

If people were privy to the contents of today’s meeting, that would probably be remembered as a famous quote. Granted, my only thought about it was, *Y’know, there was a pro wrestler who said something similar a long time ago...*

Today was the last meeting before the two-pronged offensive. Either Fuuga’s will was absolute, or everyone else was busy preparing, because Fuuga was the only one attending on his side. Hashim had probably sat this one out as he was only going to be telling us things that had already been decided.

Meanwhile, we had Liscia and Yuriga attending on our side.

“I told you, Fuuga... The demons may have weapons we don’t know about. If you go in there like you’re out for a fun little trip, you’ll only humiliate yourselves.”

I objected to his incredibly casual attitude, but Fuuga let out a nasal laugh.

“Whether we go there with a positive or a negative outlook, the future won’t open up *until* we go. So, if it’s already decided we’re going, there’s no need to act all gloomy. Worrying is only going to make it tougher on you.”

Makubonnou... Have no worries... If I recall, that was something the Zen master Houjou Tokimune said as he faced the Mongol invasion of Japan. It was a lesson that said, “*Don’t worry, act as you feel is right.*” Maybe Fuuga had a similar mindset.

“Brother...” Yuriga said, stepping forward. “I am Sir Souma’s wife, and he is my husband. You and my husband will be facing a difficult enemy together. Normally, as the bridge between you, nothing would make me happier. But when it’s the Demon Lord’s Domain you face, my sense of unease wins out over that!”

Fuuga listened quietly to his sister’s desperate plea.

“I am still cheering for you! But I feel like this is too reckless! Shouldn’t you be more careful? Looking for the best way to handle it with Sir Souma?! One mistake could prove irreversible for you, as it did for the Gran Chaos Empire all those years ago! I’m worried!”

However, after some time, Fuuga shook his head and said, “I understand you’re saying that because you’re concerned for me.”

“Brother!”

“But I can’t stop. Pressing forward is what makes me who I am.”

...Even if that means you die along the way, huh? I thought.

Fuuga looked straight at me.

“Next time we talk, it’ll be in person, at the northernmost point on

this continent. I'm looking forward to it."

"Sure, if we aren't both dead then."

"Ha ha ha! I'll do my best to avoid that. You should too."

With that, Fuuga cut off the transmission. Yuriga slumped to the ground, powerless, while Liscia hugged her around the shoulders.

As she rubbed Yuriga's back reassuringly, Liscia looked at me and said, "So you have to go."

"Yeah... Facing this was an eventuality. I would have preferred to avoid making contact like this, where Fuuga is in the driver's seat, but...I've got to avoid letting them come into contact with Fuuga first."

"Still, you can't steal a march on Fuuga by sending our troops early. It's too dangerous for the Maritime Alliance to contact the demons alone. We still don't know anything about them. If we took major losses, we wouldn't be able to withstand an attack from the Great Tiger Empire."

"You're right... If possible, I'd have preferred the forces taking the land route to have been people we could trust, like the Gran Chaos Empire under Maria."

Now that the Empire was broken up and gone, that could only be a what-if scenario though.

Liscia got a sad look on her face. "I...can't go with you, can I?"

"Sorry... You must lead the country if anything happens to me, Liscia."

"I know. It's just frustrating having to consider my position at times like this," Liscia said, biting her lip. Unfortunately, she was going to have to deal with it.

Well, if we took heavy losses in this campaign, Fuuga would likely take massive damage too. Even if he didn't die outright, he might take heavy wounds. If that took him off the battlefield, it risked causing the collapse of the Great Tiger Empire.

Great nations built on the charisma of one man had a way of collapsing when that charisma was gone. Conversely, if the Maritime Alliance pulled together, we could likely survive the chaos after the Great Tiger Kingdom collapsed. The Maritime Alliance wasn't wholly reliant on the personality of one man, after all. If Liscia maintained good relations with Kuu, Shabon, and Jeanne and Hakuya, this nation would be able to survive without me. Liscia was the one who was of the Elfriedenian royal line anyways.

Well, it'd only make her worry if we talked about it, so I'm not going to say anything.

As we waited for Yuriga to calm down before leaving the jewel room...

""Father!""

Liscia's children, Cian and Kazuha, tottered over as fast as they could; each hugged one of my legs tight.

Now that they were turning six in the 12th month of this year, they were bigger and heavier than before. Even with the benefits of Owen's training, it was getting tough to walk with one of them on each leg.

"Hm? What's up, you two?" I asked.

Kazuha looked up and grinned, but Cian's face was still buried in my pants. As I kept wondering what this was about, Carla hurried over to us in her maid uniform.

"I-I'm sorry. They took off running because they wanted to be with you..."

"Nah, you don't have to apologize," I told her as Liscia picked up Kazuha. "Sheesh, you're such a little ball of energy."

"Yesh!" Kazuha replied exuberantly.

She seemed fine. The problem was... I put my hand on Cian's head as he continued burying his face in my pants leg.

"What's wrong, Cian?"

"Don't go..." Cian looked up at me, his eyes full of tears. "Father, don't go. If you go, you won't come back."

Hearing his plea, my eyes widened. Unlike the energetic Kazuha, Cian was a quiet boy who rarely asked for anything. These kids weren't even six years old. Naturally, they didn't know about the offensive into the Demon Lord's Domain, and even if they'd heard people talking about it in town, they wouldn't have understood. Despite that, Cian had figured out I was going somewhere dangerous.

Liscia looked at Carla, shocked, but the maid shook her head vigorously. It looked like she wasn't the one who'd explained it to him.

Don't tell me... I had one idea.

Liscia's mother, Lady Elisha's magic. When Lady Elisha was on the verge of death, she could send her memories to her past self. From what I'd been told, the one who received those memories felt like they were seeing the future. We hadn't figured out what magic Cian or Kazuha had yet. However, if Lady Elisha's ability had skipped a generation to be inherited by Cian, or he had a similar magic that could predict the future, what he had just said might be true...

I shuddered at the implications.

...And there was someone who was staring at Cian and me.



Some days later, I gathered all my key retainers—except for Hakuya who was in the Euphoria Kingdom—in the audience chamber. I was sitting on the throne with my seven wives, including Maria and

Yuriga, standing in a line behind me.

First, I called Excel, the commander in chief of the National Defense Force, and her second-in-command, Ludwin.

“Excel, Ludwin.”

““Yes, sir!””

They stepped forward and knelt at the bottom of the steps to the throne, bowing their heads.

I ordered them to raise their heads and stand.

Once they had, I continued, saying, “During this expedition to the Demon Lord’s Domain, the decisions we make in the field will be of utmost importance. I’ll have to go with the fleet myself. But...we’re being dragged into this by Fuuga and his Great Tiger Empire. In some ways, we’re not adequately prepared, so we have to expect the unexpected.”

“Yes. I agree,” Excel said with an imposing smile. “Even if the tides of this era have been on his side, he managed to build a massive empire over the course of several years. Everything I’ve heard suggests he is not a man to be trusted. We can’t be sure he won’t turn his forces around and attack this country while you’re away, sire.”

I nodded in agreement. “You have a point. We can’t be lax in our preparations... Ludwin.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll be leaving our land and air forces behind, with the exception of Halbert and his Dratroopers, who will be aboard the island carrier. Harden our defenses in case Fuuga does anything shifty. Coordinate your actions with Madam Jeanne in the Euphoria Kingdom and Kuu in the Republic too.”

“Understood. I will defend this country with my life while you are away, sire.”

Nodding at Ludwin’s response, I called Julius and Kaede next.

Once they worked their way to the front, past all my other retainers, I said, “Strategist Julius and Staff Officer Kaede, I’ll be counting on you to support Ludwin. Hakuya will be here too while I’m away. I want the three of you to use your wisdom to guard this country against any schemes.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood.”

I dismissed Ludwin and the other two before looking at Excel.

“Excel. The fleet has been organized, I assume?”

“All has been done as you commanded. We are prepared to embark at any time,” Excel said with a bow. I nodded.

“You will serve as commander in chief of our fleet, and take command during battles. Although we are also leaving behind the land forces, we will deploy all of our maritime forces. However, a

portion of them will be left behind in order to respond to unexpected circumstances that may arise. We won't just be bringing the carrier *Hiryuu*, but also the completed ships of the same model, *Souryuu* and *Unryuu*. You will also serve as captain of the *Souryuu*."

"Understood."

Once I had dismissed Excel, I looked at my other retainers.

"The Demon Lord's Domain is a danger that has constantly hung over the heads of all mankind, and also what made Fuuga into a great man. As things stand, the Demon Lord's Domain is our communal enemy and the justification for taking military action against the other nations. If this threat can be removed, it will become more difficult for Fuuga to justify his military operations. That will help bring peace to our country and our comrades in the Maritime Alliance."

With that, I paused to take a breath.

"If we can, I'd like to be as careful as possible, and try to seek dialogue with the demons, but...things may not go that way on the battlefield. We have to prepare for the unknown and be ready to make decisions at multiple junctures. I want you all to lend me your strength until this difficult trial is behind us!"

""""Yes, sir!""""

The whole group put their hands together in front of them and bowed their heads.

With everyone having been given their marching orders, I headed to the royal dining hall with my wives, plus Ichiha and Tomoe. The maids Serina and Carla were present too. Albert and Elisha, who had come to play with the children, were looking after them at the daycare.

I addressed this gathering of family and extras, saying, "I'll be bringing Aisha and Naden along on this expedition."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

"Yeah, of course you would."

Aisha and Naden, my top two wives when it came to combat, nodded.

"We can't take Liscia, Roroa, or Maria," I said. "They're too influential to let anything happen to them... And if anything happens to me, you all have to be ready for it."

"Yeah..."

"Even if I tagged along, there ain't much I could do to help you, darlin'."

"I always left command of our troops to Jeanne, after all..."

My three wives who had to think about their positions reluctantly nodded. Even if I couldn't come back like Cian predicted, Liscia could work with Roroa and Maria to keep the domestic situation under control.

I'd really prefer it didn't come to that though...

"That leaves Juna and Yuriga..."

"I'll be handy in a battle at sea. Take me with you," Juna said before I could finish.

It was true that I wanted Juna to come along and take command of the *Albert II*, which I planned to be aboard. But when I considered how young Enju and Kaito were...I hesitated. Juna smiled, seeming to see right through me.

"The children have plenty of reliable mother figures here in the castle. There's nothing to worry about."

"Juna... Okay. I'll be relying on you."

"Yes."

Once Juna had finished, Yuriga raised her hand and said, "I'll go with you too. I'll be more of a check against my brother with you than staying here in the Kingdom."

"A check against him? Do you think you can do that?"

"To a degree... I'd like to think I will, even if only a little," Yuriga said, not sounding terribly confident.

"Well, okay. I guess a little is better than nothing... Welcome aboard."

"Understood."

"Now...Tomoe and Ichiha, could I ask you to come? We'd be keeping you at the rear, away from the front lines, of course."

If we were going to contact the demons, Tomoe's ability and Ichiha's knowledge were going to be indispensable. I didn't want to leave them anywhere too dangerous, so I'd have to be able to evacuate them immediately if there was a crisis.

They looked at one another, then nodded.

"Of course, Big Brother! It's why you adopted me in the first place!"

"I feel the same way. Now's my chance to repay you for hiring me."

"Thank you, both of you," I said, showing my gratitude. Having given orders to everyone, I moved to wrap things up. "Now then—"

"Wait!" someone interrupted.

I looked over to see Carla in her maid dress, arm raised.

"Your Majesty. Please, take me with you on this expedition."

"Carla?" Liscia stared at her, eyes wide.

Carla looked at Liscia and thumped her chest with one hand. "The more bodyguards His Majesty has, the better. I'm sure you must feel uneasy not being able to go with him yourself, so I'll defend him in your stead."

"Well, I would feel a lot better with you there..." Liscia said, casting a look at me which said, *How about it?*

Hrm... Well, Carla is a powerful fighter, and it'd be reassuring to have her nearby, I guess.

She was still a slave (by her own request), so if anything happened to her, it wouldn't have a wider impact. That helped lower the bar for bringing her along. She was always watching the kids for us too, so if she wanted to do some warrior stuff for the first time in a while, I had no reason to refuse.

"Got it. You come too, Carla."

"Thank you!"

With that, we were all good to go. Now it was time to see how it all panned out... We headed off to the mysterious Demon Lord's Domain, where monsters, giants, and mushrooms awaited.



Chapter 8: Encounter Battle

—11th month, 1553rd year, Continental Calendar — Night—

The forces of the Great Tiger Empire had begun their march at last towards the northernmost point of the continent of Landia. They had only mobilized soldiers from the Great Tiger Empire of Haan and the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, but high elf volunteers joined them from the Father Island of the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, and so did refugees who wanted to take back the northern lands. In total, their forces numbered around 800,000 men.

Fuuga divided this force into three groups that would push towards the depths of the Demon Lord's Domain. One, led by Shuukin, and including the high elves, would head in from the west. Another, led by Lombard—the former King of Remus, and including troops from the former Gran Chaos Empire, would take the center. And the last, led by Fuuga himself, and including his elite warriors and the highly motivated refugees who wanted to retake their homelands, would enter from the east.

However, the Shuukin and Lombard's forces were mainly meant to distract the demons and defend the occupied territories, so they had been ordered not to get ahead of Fuuga's. Meanwhile, at the same time, they had received reports that Souma, the head of the Maritime Alliance, was leading a fleet of the Friedonian National Naval Defense Force towards the northern end of the continent by sea.

Fuuga's main force advanced, wiping out the scattered groups of monsters that ambushed them along the way. The strategist, Hashim, rushed over to Fuuga and Mutsumi, who were at the center of that force.

"Your Imperial Majesty, according to our scouts' reports, there is a group of forts that the demons have built using cities and villages up ahead. The scouts surveyed them from a distance out of caution, so we do not know the situation inside, but their numbers are considerable."

"Which means we're in demon territory now, huh?" Fuuga, who had been lying on Durga's back, sat up. "It's about time. Mankind's counterattack starts here then."

Mutsumi, who was riding a horse beside him, frowned when she

saw the feral smile on Fuuga's face.

"Even at the height of their power, having gathered forces from across the continent, the Gran Chaos Empire was still unable to defeat them. Be sure not to let your guard down, darling."

"That is true," Hashim agreed with Mutsumi. But Fuuga just grinned.

"I know that. We're trying to feel them out for now. But the Gran Chaos Empire had an assortment of disparate forces, and their commanders couldn't bring them together. That's why they collapsed after one loss. But we're different. As long as I don't suddenly get taken out, we may end up on the back foot, but we'll be able to recover."

"That is what worries me. You always want to head right to the front," Hashim said with cool eyes, making Fuuga scratch his head awkwardly.

"Listen, I get it... Just this one time, I'm gonna play it safe. First, we'll send out the refugees as skirmishers. The wyvern cavalry will watch from the air. Split our elite cavalry and have them stand by on both flanks."

Skirmishers were soldiers that fought in an irregular formation, using ranged attacks to disrupt the enemy's formation before battle, then retreated to the rear when the enemy advanced. Fuuga's orders made it so that if the enemy unexpectedly attacked them, they would only lose people they could afford to lose. If it appeared they were at a disadvantage, it would be easier to withdraw their main forces. Basically, the refugees had minimal value, so he was using them as decoys. Hashim, who knew his intentions, bowed his head.

"Understood. I will tell our forces," Hashim said before riding off.

Fuuga turned to Mutsumi. "Send a messenger to Shuukin and Lombard's forces to tell them that we'll begin the battle at dawn. If things get bogged down, their arrival should change the tide of battle."

"Yes. I'll do it at once."

Mutsumi's horse took off at a gallop. Fuuga watched her go, then turned to glare at what was ahead of them.

"Now...let's see what comes out. Will it be demons or the demon god?" he murmured to himself.

Just after dawn, when it was still not that bright out, the Great Tiger Empire decided to mount their attack. If they were to attack later at midday, the punishing heat would have rapidly exhausted the troops. The refugee soldiers, who had been ordered to attack the forts and withdraw, were approaching as skirmishers. The refugees had been told that their mission was to find out if there were defenders in

the forts, and if so, what their relative strength was. However...

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

“Wh-What?!”

“An earthquake?!”

The moment they tried to approach one of the forts, the ground began to shake. The rumbling grew in intensity, and it became clear something was approaching them.

“I-Is something coming?”

“What in the world?!”

As terror began to set in, *it* appeared in front of the refugee soldiers. Not from inside the fort, but sliding out from behind. So tall that it forced the attackers to look up, it came towards them with a great rumbling, flattening the ground beneath as it approached.

“Th-The hell is that?!”

“A-A mushroom monster?!”

“A-A three-eyed mushroom monster!”

The massive entity certainly resembled a mushroom, or perhaps a two-ball snowman with the lower ball half buried in the ground. And high above the refugee soldiers’ heads, in the upper parts of it, were three peach-colored flashing lights...

“○△×□●!!!”

It spoke what resembled a word, so loudly that it could be heard by everyone in the vicinity. But it wasn’t in the common language of the continent, so no one understood. However, they sensed that whatever it meant, it was not welcoming them.

“○△×□●!!!” it repeated.

Still unable to understand, the refugee soldiers stared up at the massive entity in a daze. As they did, the mushroom’s center part started flashing brightly, the light growing larger and larger.

“Oh, crap!”

Fuuga’s wild instincts sounded the alarm inside his head as he watched from a distance, and he immediately gave the order.

“Have all our forces scatter! Whatever they do, they need to get out of the way now!”

Fuuga sent out runners and messenger kuis. He had the center of the army, where he was, split into two, deliberately forcing both flanks to break formation. This divided Fuuga’s main force in the rear down the middle. However, the skirmishers were widely spread out and didn’t notice this movement, so they just stood there, staring in awe.

Then the massive mushroom-shaped figure stopped gathering light.

—————!!!

Suddenly, the light was unleashed directly towards the area in

front of it.

The surging light engulfed a third of the refugee soldiers and swallowed up a portion of Fuuga's main force that was slower to flee. Those caught in the light were erased in an instant, leaving not so much as a speck of dust behind. The hot wind that came with the brilliant light blew away the skirmishers who'd escaped, and its heat was even felt by Fuuga's main force to the rear.

Damn! Is this the demon weapon Souma was talking about?!

Fuuga clicked his tongue in distaste as he glared at the light that was fading away.

Due to taking precautions in advance and reacting quickly, Fuuga's best forces had avoided harm. The refugee skirmishers looked nearly wiped out if you factored in the number who were blown away in the wind and wounded, but this was still a situation where they could regroup and head straight into battle.

"Lord Fuuga! Give the order for an all-out attack at once!" Hashim suggested from nearby. "I cannot imagine they could unleash an attack like that repeatedly. This is our chance. While that monster is quiet, we must attack with all our forces and destroy it!"

"If we retreat here, it'll just be a repeat of the last time, huh? Fine then, do it!"

Fuuga instantly agreed to Hashim's suggestion. He leapt onto Durga's back, racing into the sky to bellow commands.

"Listen up, men! I hear King Souma of Friedonia led his own fleet to battle a 'kaiju' the size of a mountain! If he can do it, then do you think that I, your emperor, can't too?! Do you think there's anything that timid, passive country can do that you, my brave warriors, can't also do? No! Absolutely not!"

After Fuuga's speech brought his panicking men to their senses, they let out a battle cry. Seeing their morale restored, Fuuga pointed his rock-rending blade, Zanganto, towards the massive enemy.

"Now is the time! After all our long years of suffering, mankind's counterattack begins now! Follow me!"

When Fuuga and Durga charged, they inspired a fanatical zeal in those who saw them, and that passion soon spread through the entire army. And so, Fuuga's forces launched an all-out attack on their massive mushroom-shaped enemy.



Meanwhile, at the same time...

"Dawn, huh...?"

I was squinting at the sunlight as I stood on the bridge of the *Albert II*. The Friedonian fleet was out at sea, so we were met by the sun's early rise.

A Nine-Headed Dragon Kingdom fleet led by Kishun had joined us as escorts, and we had three island carriers of our own. The combined total of our forces here was larger than the group that had slain Ooyamizuchi.

The three island carriers were positioned at the front, middle, and rear, each with a ring of battleships around them in a defensive formation. The front ship was Castor's *Hiryuu*, the middle was Excel's *Souryuu*, and the rear was the *Unryuu*, which had the battleship *Albert II* as one of its escort ships.

Further to the rear of the fleet were supply ships and the battleship carrying Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga, escorted by the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Fleet. This group was not intended to see battle, and was to withdraw immediately in the event of unforeseen events.

"Clear skies and calm seas...?" I mumbled to myself as I looked out over the dawn-kissed waves.

"Yes, the sea is very calm. Why the long face?" Juna asked, who was standing beside me in her white naval uniform. She looked beautiful in her usual lorelei outfit, but she was just as attractive in uniform.

I forced a smile and nodded. "I feel with this expedition...that I've been dragged into it by someone else's decision, and I'm just not happy about that."

"Someone else's decision?"

"I'm not doing all this of my own volition."

It was thanks to Fuuga's choices that I was sending troops to the Demon Lord's Domain. In all the battles before now, I had made the decision for myself and been able to prepare. But not this time...

Machiavelli said *virtù* was needed to face *fortuna*.

Now, as for what *virtù* is, in Japanese, we tend to break it into other words for power, will, and passion when translating it, but it's essentially, "to find one's resolve, make a decision, and prepare." If power is needed to fight fate, it means, "Carve a path forward with your own hands. Don't rely on other people or fortune, good or bad." Machiavelli would not have approved of me entrusting my fate to Fuuga's decision like I had this time.

There was also the unsettling thing Cian said about me not coming back.

"I may never have felt this heavyhearted in all my time as king."

"Have no fear. I will defend you, sire."

"Yeah. We'll protect you."

Aisha and Naden reassured me enthusiastically. Juna was smiling too.

My wives sure are reliable. I smiled back at them to convey my

gratitude.

Suddenly, Carla rushed over with a message from a messenger kui.

“Sire! It’s from my father... No, Captain Castor’s ship! It says, ‘Something in the sky ahead. Remain alert.’”

“Huh?!”

I hurriedly squinted in the direction we were going. But I couldn’t see anything.

“Ah! I see it!” said Aisha, who had the best eyesight out of all of us. I still couldn’t make out anything.

“It’s a little over the horizon,” she continued. “Is it...floating in midair? And if it looks that big at this distance...it must be huge!”

“Sire!” Juna was the next to raise her voice. “Grandmother’s *Souryuu* is using signal flags. ‘All ships prepare for battle. Turn sideways while maintaining a ring around the carriers.’”

Basically, Excel wanted us to spread out sideways so we could enter battle immediately depending on what the other side did.

“Aisha. Is the thing you can see doing anything?”

“It’s just hanging in the air. There is no movement. Wait...is that an armored giant?”

Sami’s research group reported a mushroom and an armored giant. Had we run into the giant? Considering it hadn’t suddenly ambushed us, did that mean there was room for dialogue? It looked like we’d be closing distance with the enemy while trying to discern if it meant to attack us or not.

In which case...it’s a bad idea for me and Excel to be this far apart, huh? I was our political decision maker while Excel and the other commanding officers were our military decision makers. It was dangerous for there to be a time lag between the two.

After a moment’s consideration, I decided.

“I’m moving to the *Souryuu*. Naden, carry me to where Excel is.”

“Huh?! Er, roger that!”

“Sire!” Juna gave me a look of concern, but I shook my head.

“If there’s a disconnect between my decisions and Excel’s, that risks throwing the whole fleet into disarray. It will be more reliable if we meet face-to-face in order to reconcile our military and political decisions. Let me go.”

“Urgh... Okay.” Juna was struggling to accept it, but she nodded.

“Sorry... I need you to take command of the *Albert II*, Juna.”

“Understood... Please, take care.”

“You too, Juna. Aisha, Carla, you’ll be coming with us as bodyguards.”

““Yes, sir!””

I jumped onto Naden’s back after she transformed into her black

ryuu form, and Juna watched as we flew off into the sky. Since time was of the essence, Naden held Aisha and Carla in her hands. And as we were heading towards the *Souryuu*, I was able to see that there was something far off in the distance, but it was still just a tiny speck, so I couldn't make it out clearly.

We landed on the deck of the *Souryuu* and I jumped down off Naden's back. Excel rushed over to us at once.

"Your timing is impeccable, Your Majesty. I was just about to call for you."

"Excel, has it moved at all?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"Not yet. Our ships have strict orders to stand by until it does."

"Good. Aisha tells me it's an armored giant."

"Yes. We have a report from Castor as well... It's hard to believe that one of the two entities that wiped out the combined forces of mankind led by the Gran Chaos Empire is right before us now..."

Excel's usually relaxed expression darkened. That meant the situation was bad enough to make a woman as impressive as her lose her composure.

Suddenly, a loud sound echoed over the sea.

"○△×□●!!!"

""""Wha?!""""

It was probably a voice of some sort. Some kind of language. And judging by the tone, it was a warning. However, I couldn't make out what it was saying... *Wait, what?*

In all the time since I'd come to this world, I had never struggled with the language.

From what my researchers Genia and Merula told me, the enchantments in the summoning chamber used to call a hero were all related to language, and likely were meant to make it so the summoned hero could speak the common language of this continent. And yet, I was hearing a language I couldn't understand?

"Does anyone know what it's saying?"

Aisha, Naden, Carla, and Excel all shook their heads. No one could make out what it was saying. Not even me. That meant this wasn't the continent's common tongue, nor was it any of the languages I recognized from Earth. Well, I could only really make out the words if it was Japanese or English, but I figured I'd at least recognize the other major languages. And I didn't.

"○△×□●!!!"

It was the same words, once more. *What in the world is it trying to say to us?!*

I was still bewildered when a messenger kui flew over and landed on Aisha's arm. She immediately opened the letter it was carrying and recited its contents.

“Sire! It’s from Madam Juna aboard the *Albert III*! There’s an urgent message from Madam Tomoe in the rear of the fleet!”

“From Tomoe?”

“Yes! About the voice we just heard!”

Huh?! Oh, right. Maybe Tomoe’s ability allowed her to understand this voice!

“What’s Tomoe have to say?!” I asked, and Aisha got a strange look on her face.

“Apparently, the voice is saying: ‘Beyond here is the realm of northern test subjects. If southern test subjects attempt to influence them, defensive actions will be taken!’”

Test subjects...? Northern test subjects. Southern test subjects. Those terms stood out as strange to me, but it was clear that the giant was warning us.

“Excel! Order all our ships to stop!”

“Understood,” Excel replied, immediately signaling for all ships to cease movement.

Our ships all stopped but remained ready to respond to an attack. The air grew tense with uncertainty as the foreign entity gradually approached us.

When it was finally close enough to get a good look at it... *Whuh?!* My eyes bulged, and I was at a loss for words.

At first, I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. Next, I touched my forehead, thinking I was delirious with fever. Then, I pinched my cheek, because it might be a dream. It occurred to me it might be an illusion spell of some sort, so I asked Aisha, Naden, and Excel what they saw—but no, it was the same for them too...

“This is the armored giant from the stories...”

“So it was for real.”

Aisha and Naden both gulped.

No, this isn’t an armored giant or anything so mild... Okay, fair enough. If all you had to go on was the common knowledge of this world, it certainly looked like an armored giant. I’d heard they often referenced Western or Japanese armor when doing the designs for *this kind of thing*.

Why... Why does this thing actually exist? I thought as I looked up at the thing that had stopped in a position where it could look down at us.

I...knew what it was called.

If it matched the catalog specs, it was around twenty meters tall, weighed approximately sixty tons, and had a thermonuclear engine for its power source. It flew with a jet pack on its back called Aranzal Zerde. It was Jangar Sky-type, the aerial combat version of the protagonist’s machine in the mecha anime *Assault Suits Jangar*. The

kind of gigantic humanoid weapon that should have only existed in the fictional world of anime had appeared before us.

I knew this world was connected to my old world somehow, but still! I was already confident that this world and my own world were related. But this was basically an answer at this point.

As I stared, overwhelmed by the situation...

“○△×□●!!!”

Jangar issued those same words, which I could only assume were a warning, again. Negotiations were impossible if we couldn't understand each other's languages...

“Excel, send a wyvern rider to pick up Tomoe and bring her here. Order all our ships not to move no matter what until Tomoe arrives.”

“Understood.”

Excel hurried away to take care of all the arrangements.

That left us on the deck, continuing the staredown with Jangar.

If that thing wasn't a paper tiger and it really had all the specs it did in the anime...it could probably sink an island carrier on its own. However, if we sent the dragon knight team of Hal and Ruby and overwhelmed it with all the wyvern cavalry, we might be able to defeat it with the power of sheer numbers. That's because if it was faithful to the catalog specs, it had limits to how long it could operate and how many rounds each of its weapons carried.

It's just like how, in zombie movies, even if an armored car was able to pump the encroaching horde full of lead, their continuous assault would eventually wear it down. But what we would be expending against that thing wouldn't be zombies, it would be soldiers. Flesh and blood people with families waiting for them back home. I didn't want to treat them as disposable.

“It's still not moving... What do you think, sire?” Aisha asked, greatsword at the ready.

I shook my head. “I don't know. But since it issued a warning, I'd like to believe there's room for dialogue.”

“We can only hope...”

Now, it's a test of patience, I thought. If it will just sit put until Tomoe arrives—

“Ah! Souma!” Naden, who had been looking around, raised her voice. “This is bad! A Nine-Headed Dragon Fleet Ship is on the move!”

“What?!”

One of the Nine-Headed Dragon Kingdom ships that Shabon had sent to escort us had broken under the pressure of the situation and started to take action. The commander of the Nine-Headed Dragon Fleet, Kishun, had offered to protect Tomoe and her group, so I'd placed the ships deployed here under our command. However, coming from a nation of pirates, the sailors of the Nine-Headed Dragon

Archipelago were a bloodthirsty bunch, so they'd been unable to take the pressure.

The very next instant, Jangar's head swiveled in their direction, and...

“×□●○△×□.”

It said something different from before as it pulled the rifle from its backpack and pointed the barrel towards that ship. *Oh, no!*

“Sto—” My words were drowned out by the sound of light screaming out of the barrel of its rifle.

In an instant, the light pierced the Nine-Headed Dragon Fleet ship, probably igniting the gunpowder aboard, as it was blasted to pieces. The explosion was so big that the flames engulfed several nearby ships.

Beam weapons... What I had just witnessed wasn't like a laser beam, which would pierce the target the moment it fired—it was just like in an anime, where it moved just fast enough that the eye could still follow its movement. It looked like a weapon that used real ammunition, but could pierce or burn its way through anything.

It took a second shot as I watched, igniting a Nine-Headed Dragon Fleet Ship.

“Sire! Give your orders!” Excel rushed over and yelled, snapping me to my senses.

I had no idea what the right order to give in this situation was, but delaying my decision would only increase casualties. I had to do *something*.

“Urgh... Send out all the wyvern cavalry from the *Hiryuu*, *Souryuu*, and *Unryuu*! But prioritize disrupting the enemy over attacking it! In the meantime, have the fleet withdraw! And tell the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Fleet this: if they decide to ignore my orders and keep fighting, they're on their own!”

“We're retreating then?”

“If its words are to be believed, this is a defensive action. If we don't approach their territory, it won't pursue us... Let's trust in that.”

“Understood...”

Excel held up her fan as a signal, then gave the orders I'd given her.

The wyvern cavalry led by Halbert and Ruby all took off from the three island carriers in scattered groups. Then the wyvern cavalry went to swarm around Jangar like mosquitoes. I could see Hal on his red dragon in the fray too.

—————!!!

Jangar fired its beam weapon at Ruby, who must have stood out the most. I broke into a cold sweat watching, but Hal and Ruby had seen the attack before, and skillfully dodged it by getting out from in

front of the barrel. Because they were used to seeing magic, maybe the existence of a beam weapon in and of itself wasn't all that surprising to them.

After dodging, Hal had Ruby spit a fireball at Jangar. However, Jangar blocked with its arm shield, and was unscathed.

Seeing that, the wyvern cavalry unleashed their fire attacks one after another. They didn't seem to do much damage either, but the rising flames and smoke obscured the enemy's field of view.

"Excel! Order the retreat now!"

Ra-tat-tat-tat-tat! The Vulcan cannons in Jangar's chest tore through the wyvern knights.

The matchlocks they could make in this world wouldn't have been able to pierce a wyvern's flesh, but Jangar's Vulcans ripped right through it, tearing many wyvern knights to pieces, leaving them to fall to a watery grave.

Then a moment later, Jangar's backpack spewed fire, instantly breaking out of the wyvern cavalry's encirclement and bringing it to the deck of our carrier—the *Souryuu*—in no time.

It all happened so fast, no one could move.

—————!!!

Jangar fired its beam weapon at the deck once. The *Souryuu* shook hard, and though it didn't explode, it listed heavily to one side. It was clear that it had disabled the vessel with one shot. *Grr... First, it makes it so we can't run, huh?*

Then Jangar pointed its chest Vulcans in *my* direction.

Based on the way it had stopped our movement and singled me out from all the people on deck, it knew who was the top commander of this fleet. *Is it aiming for a quick resolution with a decapitating strike?* I thought, my mind racing faster than usual in the face of a threat to my life.

Its chest Vulcans opened fire. The bullets tore into the ground, leaving a trail of bullet holes that were coming in my direction.

Oh, shi—

Slam!



That very moment, someone pushed me out of the way. I stared, aghast, as I watched the person standing where I had been a moment ago get pierced by bullets.

Her armor, red as her hair, was shattered, and fresh blood gushed forth from her body.

“Carla!!!”

She slumped to the deck as I screamed her name.



There was something a little odd about Prince Cian.

“Carla. Could you look after the children for me for a moment?”

“Sure. Leave it to me, Liscia.”

Prince Cian and Princess Kazuha are the children of the master I serve. They are the proper heirs to the Royal House of Elfrieden, and most importantly, the children of my dear friend Liscia. Having watched over them as a maid from the time they were born, they were incredibly precious to me.

Around when they’d turned two years of age—when they couldn’t talk yet but could toddle around and play in the courtyard—an incident occurred.

“Whah... Whaaaa!”

Cian, who had been happily playing with Princess Kazuha up until that point, suddenly burst out crying. Then he hugged Princess Kazuha tight and tried to stop her from going anywhere.

This was unusual for the usually introverted Cian. But Kazuha, who took after her tomboyish mother, pulled herself free, as if telling him he was being a nuisance, and then ran off.

Prince Cian fell over and then rolled up in a ball, weeping.

“A-Are you all right, Lord Cian?” I asked, rushing over to him.

At the same time, Princess Kazuha climbed up onto the edge of the fountain in the courtyard and started walking along it.

Suddenly... *Sploosh!* She lost her balance and plunged into the water.

“Wahhhh!!!”

I picked up Prince Cian and put him under my arm, then rushed over to scoop Princess Kazuha out of the water.

Princess Kazuha stared blankly at me for a while, but then what had happened hit her, and she started bawling into my chest. When he heard her, Prince Cian started crying too, and I didn’t know what to do about it.

Similar incidents happened over and over.

Whenever Princess Kazuha put herself in danger and got hurt, Prince Cian would start crying before it happened and try to stop her.

He failed most of the time, but after seeing it happen so often, I started to think: *Prince Cian knows when Princess Kazuha will be in danger?*

With that suspicion, I began observing the two of them more closely.

When Princess Kazuha got hurt, Prince Cian would cry right before it happened. Conversely, there were a number of times when I was able to protect Princess Kazuha by observing her closely after the prince cried.

Can Prince Cian see the future?

It was unusual for someone to manifest magic at such a young age, so it was traditional in this country to wait until they were older before investigating what kind of magic they had. However, if Prince Cian had already manifested magic, and it was some kind of precognition or prophetic magic, it would explain the strange behavior I'd been observing.

Then, just the other day, Prince Cian tried to stop King Souma from going to the Demon Lord's Domain.

"You won't come back."

That's what he said. If this was a prediction made by his magic, then my master's life might be in danger. That was why I volunteered to join him on this expedition, so that I could be at his side and protect him.

Ra-tat-tat-tat-tat!

That's why...I was able to defend him from the giant's attack.

I felt my consciousness slipping before I could feel the pain of the impact that tore through my chest. But seeing the look of shock on my master's face, I was just relieved that I'd been able to protect him.

Because...I'm supposed to kill you...when you become a tyrant... I can't let you die here.

These thoughts echoed in my mind as my consciousness faded.



My mind went blank as I watched Carla collapse.

It was like all sound had receded from my ears—all the noise that had filled the world vanished at once. I didn't know what Aisha or Naden, who were right beside me, were saying as I rushed to Carla's side and cradled her in my arms.

"Why youuuu!"

"Grahhhh!"

Hal and Ruby dropped out of the sky and slammed into Jangar.

Sound gradually returned to my ears. A copious amount of blood flowed out of Carla's chest, and the life was draining from her face. Death was creeping closer to her. I could feel it.

“Sire!”

“Souma!”

But Aisha and Naden’s voices wouldn’t let me give up thinking.

If I gave up thinking now, death would rain down on Aisha, Naden, and so many others too. I punched myself in the forehead, then laid Carla’s body down on the deck.

Then I turned to look at Excel who was standing there, speechless, and I said to her, “Excel. Take care of Carla. And have the fleet withdraw.”

“Understood, but what will you be doing, sire?” she asked.

I gazed up to the skies where Ruby was in the middle of a tailspin with Jangar.

“It’s after me. I’ll pull it away,” I said.

“What do you mean...?”

“Naden, help me out.”

When I said that, Naden seemed to snap back to her senses.

“Roger that!”

“Sire! I’m coming with you!” Aisha said, holding her greatsword ready.

I wouldn’t be able to handle incoming projectiles... I guess I had no choice but to have her come along.

“I’m counting on you, Aisha.”

“Leave it to me!”

“Sire!” Excel tried to stop us, but I held up a hand to stop her instead.

“If anything happens to us, look after Liscia and the others.”

“Understood...” Excel said, nodding. She knew there was no time to argue.

If that *thing* was after me, it probably wouldn’t pursue the retreating fleet once I was dead. My demise wouldn’t keep Liscia, Roroa, and the others who survived from running a healthy country. So, for that reason...the important thing was to ensure that no one but me died here.

I got onto Naden’s back with Aisha, and we danced up into the sky. Jangar followed us, as I’d expected. It wasn’t paying any attention to the fleet. It seemed that the Vulcan cannons on its chest couldn’t be used while in flight due to its posture, so it was taking aim at us with its beam weapon instead.

—————!!!

“To the right!”

“Roger!”

The murderous light flew towards us, but Aisha had predicted the trajectory from the direction the barrel was pointed and told Naden which way she should twist to get out of the way.

As we flew along, Aisha flung blades of air, Naden fired electric strikes, and Hal and Ruby and the wyvern cavalry used fire attacks, but Jangar showed no signs of stopping.

I looked down at the fleet below. It looked like they were making headway on evacuating the immobilized *Souryuu* and rescuing the crew of sunken ships who were floating in the water. I needed to keep buying them time...

“Sire!” Aisha’s voice snapped me back to the situation at hand.

Jangar turned and unloaded on us with its Vulcan cannons. It wasn’t aiming carefully, but the hail of bullets hit Ruby and the wyverns, causing them to lose altitude.

“Guh...!”

“Naden?!”

One of the shots had hit Naden in her back foot.

“I’m fine... It just grazed me.”

Or so she said, but the pain seemed to be affecting her balance.

Jangar turned the barrel of its beam weapon towards us as we struggled to stay aloft. *Oh, crap*, I thought, flashing back to the war with the Principality of Amidonia, when Gaius was closing in on me. That moment when I had braced myself for death.

The next moment, my eyes filled with a surge of light...

And yet, we were fine.

Another light, one *far greater* than that of the beam weapon about to be fired on us, slammed into the mech, sending it flying. Thrown through the air, Jangar was singed and sparking in a way that it was clear it had taken heavy damage.

We turned in the direction of the new light, and there was...

A white dragon, massive as a mountain, with horns like a sheep.

“Lady...Tiamat?” Naden murmured inside our heads.

It was the majestic form of Mother Dragon Tiamat, which I had seen back in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

The mother of all the dragons that resided in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. The god of Mother Dragon Worship.

That Tiamat unleashed a roar like the cry of a whale. Then, she spoke towards the clouds which hung low in the sky.

“Do you mean to slay the familiar one you have awaited so long?”

When she did. The massive black cube I had seen before descended from the clouds.



Chapter 9: The Demon Lord's True Identity

Meanwhile, in Fuuga's camp, an intense battle was unfolding between his forces and the massive mushroom. It was enormous, hard, and possessed overwhelming firepower. Faced with this unprecedented opponent, which shook the ground as it advanced, Fuuga's men surrounded it on foot and pressed the attack.

"It would seem to be less a creature and more something akin to a moving castle," Hashim said after carefully observing their opponent. "We can assume, as was stated in the investigative reports we received from King Souma, that it is a weapon used by the demons. Therefore, we should see this not as slaying a monster or a skirmish, but as a siege battle."

"Makes sense to me. Then we lead it around on foot, and hit it with firepower."

Fuuga was riding on Durga's back, Zanganto held ready as he gave orders to his troops.

"Cavalry and infantry spread out around it, and don't give it time to focus on a target! Think of it like a mountain fortress, and climb up if you see an opening! Mages and ranged units, stay at a distance! Focus your attacks on a single point! The rhinoceros units' cannons are powerful, so just keep on hammering it!"

Fuuga barked orders one after another, and his commanders went to work.

Having absorbed officers of the former Gran Chaos Empire into their ranks and learned their techniques, the cannon-equipped rhinoceroses moved up and began bombarding the massive mushroom weapon. They were using shells that didn't explode and relied on kinetic energy, but with enough hits, they were able to put dents in the mushroom-type weapon and damage it.

The Flag of the Tiger, Gaten Bahr—the dandy of Fuuga's forces—brought his horse up alongside that of the Crossbow of the Tiger, Kasen Shuri, who was leading the archers.

"Kasen. Our whips and bows can't land effective blows on that thing. All we can do is draw its attention, I suppose."

“Disrupting the enemy! Got it! Archers, follow me!”

Kasen and Gaten ran around with the mounted archers, plinking arrows off the mushroom-type weapon even though they knew it was futile. After unleashing that light, the mushroom-type weapon had begun spinning the three cannon-like things on its body, blowing away the soldiers who were swarming it. They needed to keep it busy so those explosions wouldn't target the cannon rhinosauruses.

Meanwhile, the battle maniac, Nata Chima—the Battle-ax of the Tiger—was getting frustrated.

“Damn it! Where do I need to climb up to plant my ax in that thing...? Whoa!”

As he muttered that, Nata suddenly found himself swept off the ground. Looking up, he saw that he was in the mouth of a griffon belonging to Krahe Laval, the Wings of the Tiger, who commanded their air force.

“Screw you, Krahe! What're you doing?!”

“You appeared eager to go wild, so I thought I might take you to a good place for it, Sir Nata.”

Having said that, Krahe flew his griffon up the side of the mushroom-type monster to drop Nata off on the top. It was an empty space with a streamlined shape, like the top of a dune.

“I'm sure you will be able to swing your ax to your heart's content up here.”

“O-Oh, yeah? Well, aren't you considerate.”

“Now, I wish you the best of luck.”

With that, Krahe left. Looking around, Nata could see other brawny members of Fuuga's forces being dropped off there one after another.

Nata smirked and wound up to swing his ax hard.

“Aw, yeah! Let's do this!”

He slammed it down with spirit. This was how the members of Fuuga's forces fought the mushroom-type weapon in their own way, but the weapons' attacks were rapidly increasing the number of casualties.

“Hahhhh!”

Crackle! Flying around on Durga and unleashing bolts of lightning powerful enough to smite a rhinoceros, Fuuga succeeded in destroying one of the big cannons, but he was getting exhausted and impatient.

His men were putting up a good fight, but he couldn't ignore the mounting losses. The only enemy they had encountered so far was this mushroom weapon, and they hadn't seen any demons yet. If he exhausted too much of his manpower, it would become impossible to continue the war. He could recover by joining up with the detached

columns led by Shuukin and Lombard, but he wanted to still hold the advantage when he met up with Souma's forces in the depths of the Demon Lord's Domain.

There are limits to the number of land forces Souma could bring with his fleet, so Fuuga had expected to have numerical superiority...

Here's hoping Souma's run into similar troubles... Fuuga thought.

Boom! Suddenly, out of nowhere, a massive fireball flew into the mushroom-type weapon and burst. Fuuga turned, trying to figure out what happened, and saw more dragons than he could count floating in the air. There were knights riding on their backs.

Fuuga furrowed his brow. "Dragon knights... The guys from Nothing, huh?"

The Nothing Dragon Knight Kingdom was an exclusively defensive nation, so they generally did not involve themselves in other countries' wars. Fuuga was questioning what they were doing here when Queen Sill Munto flew over to him on the back of her partner, Pai the White Dragon.

"Sir Fuuga. We're here to help you neutralize that thing at the request of the Star Dragon Mountain Range," Sill declared.

Fuuga glared at her. "What're you playing at? You never cared about the Demon Lord's Domain before."

"Didn't I just tell you? Our ally, Mother Dragon Tiamat, asked us to do this. But we'll only help you until that thing goes down. Once it's destroyed, we're pulling out."

From the tone of Sill's voice, she would have never helped Fuuga and his men after they'd destroyed the Kingdom of Lastania and killed some of her dragon knights. Still, this was a request from the Star Dragon Mountain Range, so she'd had no choice but to join him.

Well, that's fine then, Fuuga thought. If she was going to help him here and not get deeply involved in the invasion of the Demon Lord's Domain itself, that was incredibly convenient for him.

"Oh, yeah...? Well, do what you like."

"Yes. We're going to do just that."

Sill returned to her knights and raised her spear aloft.

"Everyone, have at it!"

With that short command, the dragon knights began attacking the mushroom-type weapon. One blast of a dragon's breath melted the surface of the mushroom-type weapon, leaving it charred. After that, whenever the air force dropped powder kegs on it or it was hit by rhinosaurus cannon fire, it left visible damage. The insides were exposed in some places, while sparks flew in others.

Seeing the tide of battle turn, Sill was quietly relieved. *Oh, good... It looks like we can manage this.*

She had been surprised when the request came to support Fuuga's forces and fight the giant weapon they expected would appear, but the dragon knights had agreed to a pact that didn't allow them to refuse. Despite her misgivings, Sill had brought her troops, and now she was relieved to see things were going to work out.

"This was an anomaly even in the history of our country. Madam Tiamat has never requested we send dragon knights outside the country before now."

"Yeah. She must have been in quite the hurry," Sill's partner Pai replied telepathically. "Her real goal is probably over where Souma and Naden are. She sent us here so she could go there herself. That way it wouldn't look like she was favoring one side."

"Hmm... What a roundabout way of doing things."

"She has a lot of restrictions on her, so she had little choice. If she had to go this far, then that means..."

"This war is just that important, is it?" Sill clenched the hand she was holding her spear with. "Then, as her allies, we must fight to our utmost. Onward, Pai!"

"Okay!"

The silver dragon knight charged towards the mushroom-type weapon and joined the battle.

After some time, the combined forces of the Great Tiger Empire and the Dragon Knight Kingdom succeeded in neutralizing the massive mushroom-type weapon.



On the seas...

The black cube emerged from the clouds and descended in front of us. However, Jangar didn't stop moving, and was still trying to fire its beam weapon. The black cube teleported, interposing itself between Jangar and us. The cube shuddered as it took a direct hit from the beam.

Huh?! It protected us?!

While I was still surprised, I heard the same voice that I'd heard in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

"Familiar one... Souma Kazuya... I have been waiting," the familiar voice said. It was a loud, hard-to-make-out voice, but I was managing to pick out the words better than last time.

Then the black cube summoned clouds to itself, generating a whirlwind with rain and lightning, and it slammed into Jangar. The mech was sent flying, and its moves became jerky, like a puppet with multiple strings cut.

"Stop this, Guardian 01. He is not an enemy for you to repel," the cube said in a strangely feminine voice. "Souma Kazuya. I will execute

the control protocol for Guardian 01.”

“Huh?”

“Please transfer control permissions to me,” the black cube said.

Control protocol? Transfer permissions? Come again? As I looked at the cube in confusion, it continued, its tone more urgent.

“Your voice is required. Please.”

Asking me nicely doesn't explain anything... I turned to look at Madam Tiamat, and she nodded.

“I, uh, authorize the transfer of control!”

“Transfer confirmed. Executing control protocol for Guardian 01.”

With that, Jangar stopped its jerky motions. It fired the verniers on its back, hovering in place, but its arms hung limply at its sides rather than pointing a weapon at us.

“Guardian 01 has now been placed under my control.” The cube's voice resounded through the suddenly quiet sky. “Terminating self-defense functions.”

“Uh, what? What's going on?”

“None of this makes any sense to us...”

Naden and Aisha were both confused.

I looked up at the floating cube, no more clued-in than they were.

“What...are you?”

“I have been waiting. Familiar one—ancient one—Souma Kazuya.” Then the cube slowly approached us. “I beseech you... Go to Mao, for the sake of my children. The fate of not only my own children, the northern test subjects—but the children of Tiamat, the southern test subjects—rests in your hands.”

Her children? Test subjects? This still wasn't making any sense. But there were more important things than getting an explanation right now.

“Madam Tiamat! Jangar's not going to keep moving now, right?!” I asked.

“Yes.” Madam Tiamat nodded. “The humanoid weapon is now under her control. It will not attack again without her orders.”

“Well, good. We need to hurry and rescue the guys who've fallen into the sea.”

I looked at the ocean. The island carrier *Souryuu*, which had taken a direct hit from the beam weapon, was tilted. Also, though I couldn't see her from here, Carla was lying on the bridge after taking a bullet for me. With how much blood she'd lost, her internal organs must have been shredded. If so, then light magic couldn't...

“Damn it!”

Smack!

“Sire?!”

“Souma?!”

Aisha and Naden were both surprised when I punched myself in the head.

That didn't stop me from doing it again and again. This was my fault. We'd gotten into this kind of encounter with the enemy because I'd let someone else decide things for me. As a result, Carla and many soldiers from the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Nine-Headed Dragon Kingdom were dead or injured.

I should have known better! Never let anyone make your decisions for you. How many times did I tell myself I needed virtù to tame fortuna?! Yet I let Fuuga make my decisions because I was afraid to confront him! And this is the result!

"Please, stop, sire!" Aisha pleaded with me as she grabbed my fist to stop me from hitting myself. "That isn't going to change anything!"

"Yeah!" Naden agreed. "You need to stop beating yourself up and start getting this chaos under control."

"Urgh..."

Their words had helped me cool my head a bit. The fleet was still in disarray. I didn't have time for regrets.

The cube started talking again. "Adapting to language. Tuning. Test. Test." After a pause, it continued in a much easier-to-hear voice than before. "Adaptation complete. Can you understand me?"

"I hear you, but can this wait?" I shouted in response.

"I have detected casualties as a result of the fighting." The cube's voice was calm, in contrast to our own hasty reactions. "I cannot revive those whose bodies were completely annihilated, but it will be possible to treat those with heavy wounds or who are in critical condition. Our medicinal solution may be able to repair even those who would be beyond the help of light magic."

"Come again?!" I exclaimed. *Repair... Does it mean heal? Can it help Carla and the others?*

"Tiamat. Transfer the relevant individuals to me," the cube said.

Madam Tiamat nodded before I had time to consider the cube's proposal.

"Okay. I will send all of the injured to her," Madam Tiamat said using thought speech, not waiting for us to respond before roaring. The dragon's soft voice slowly spread throughout the sky.

As we stared at her, not sure what to make of this, Madam Tiamat said in an austere voice, "I have transferred the wounded here and the wounded on land to her."

Transferred... Oh, right, Madam Tiamat had instantly teleported me to the Star Dragon Mountain Range before. Her existence really was out of scale with everything else in this world. And the wounded on land? Were those Fuuga's people? Had they been attacked by a similar weapon too? There was no way to tell from here, but I was more

concerned with what was happening down below.

“Naden. Take us to the deck of the *Souryuu*.”

“Roger that!”

I climbed onto Naden, and she descended. As we neared the *Souryuu*, Ruby was supporting the tilting ship on one side while many ships were pulling on it with ropes from the other to support the evacuation of the crew. Excel had likely seen Jangar stop attacking and shifted gears from combat to rescue operations. We spotted her on the deck and landed in front of her.

“Excel! Where’s Carla?!” I shouted at Excel, who seemed to be in a bit of a daze, as I jumped down from Naden’s back. Excel quickly regained her senses when she saw me and crossed her arms.

“Your Majesty?! Carla, she...her heart had stopped, and then all of a sudden she vanished... We’re receiving constant reports of other injured soldiers who’ve disappeared too,” she reported, sounding bewildered.

I thought so... Was Carla still just on the verge of death then? I bit my lip, but then shook my head in an attempt to change gears. Hadn’t I just decided that regrets would have to wait?

“Madam Tiamat transported the people who disappeared,” I told Excel, “I believe they were sent somewhere they can be treated.”

“Treated...?! Will Carla survive?!” Excel’s eyes widened.

I silently shook my head. “I don’t know. We just have to believe she will for now.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Excel. Our first order of business has to be getting this chaos under control. Jangar’s not going to attack anymore. Prioritize evacuating the *Souryuu* and rescuing those who fell overboard.”

“Right... Understood.” Excel nodded, but then seemed hesitant.

“Um, what should I say to Castor about Carla?”

“Sorry, but...just tell him she’s being treated.”

If the worst happened to Carla, he might resent me for it. But that wasn’t limited to Carla; you could say the same of all the bereaved families of all those who died as a result of my decision. As king, I had to bear the burden of their resentment. But right now, when it wasn’t clear if she would survive or not, it would just be cruel to put Castor on the emotional roller coaster that telling him everything exactly as it had occurred would.

As Excel and I were exchanging words, there was another voice from behind us.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“Huh?! Who’s there?!”

Excel turned, a harsh look on her face. Behind us was an elderly woman wrapped in a white robe. The woman appeared ancient, yet

her back was perfectly straight, and there was something solemn—and recognizable—about her.

Aisha fell into a combat stance with her greatsword, and Excel held her fan up like she did before unleashing her magic. Meanwhile, Naden dropped to one knee before the woman, bowing her head.

Seeing Naden's reaction, I finally remembered.

"Aisha! Excel! Stand down!"

"Huh? Sire?"

"This is Madam Tiamat!"

At my words, Aisha and Excel hurriedly let go of their weapons and fell groveling before her. The woman before us was Madam Tiamat's human form, which I'd met in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

Mother Dragon was an object of worship, a living god, after all. For the people of this world, meeting her was like coming face-to-face with the Buddha or Christ, so their reaction was to be expected. Madam Tiamat called me a "familiar one," and tried to place me even above herself. The ramifications of that were scary to think about.

Madam Tiamat extended her hand to me. "I will take you to her now."

I panicked at this sudden declaration.

"Whoa, wait a minute. Who is 'her'? The cube? That thing's a woman?"

"I answer your second question in the affirmative. Your third, the negative. That object has no sex, but for sake of convenience, I address it as female."

No sex? Is it neither male nor female? Or is it a machine, like it appeared to be? This wasn't the time to dwell on that—there were more important things to get to right now.

"I can't leave now..." I said. "I have to evacuate my people from this sinking ship."

"In that case, allow me to transport them, and this entire carrier, to the coast. That will make the rescue operation easier, I'm sure."

"Huh? You can do that?"

"Yes. I can send a number of ships. I'd like you to hurry, for her sake, after all," Madam Tiamat said, looking up to the cube that was still hanging in the sky.

I could feel a sense of pity for the cube in her tone. Madam Tiamat's eyes looked like Liscia's as she saw us off on our way to the Demon Lord's Domain. It seemed she really wanted me to go to the Demon Lord's place, or wherever she planned to send me.

After sorting out my thoughts a little, I said, "In that case, would you be able to transport this carrier, the *Souryuu*; the *Albert II*, to where Juna is? And transport the battleship in the fleet to our rear to

where Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga are?”

“That is possible,” Tiamat replied, nodding.

I turned to Excel. “Have people stop getting off the ships for now. Go to the *Hiryuu*, where Castor is, and take command of the entire fleet from there. Once all of the people thrown overboard are rescued, take the fleet and come to the northernmost point in the Demon Lord’s Domain, following our planned course. They won’t be intercepted by any more mechanical weapons like Jangar, right?”

I glanced at Madam Tiamat for affirmation, and she nodded. Excel nodded too.

“Understood, sire.”

“I’m counting on you. Now, Naden.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Go and call Hal and Ruby over at once. Tell Ruby she doesn’t need to support the carrier anymore, so they’re to come here and serve as our bodyguards. If explaining is too much effort, just tell them to get inside the carrier.”

“R-Roger that!”

Excel and Naden both left to do their things. Some time later, all of the ships had been contacted, and with all our preparations complete, I turned to Madam Tiamat.

“All right, Madam Tiamat. If you would.”

“Okay.”

Madam Tiamat instantly transformed from the guise of an old woman into a mountainous white dragon, then let her whale-song cry resound.

My vision wobbled, and the world before me immediately changed. Up until a moment ago, it had been water all the way to the horizon, but now it was a beach that continued into a desert. And beyond the sands, we could see...

““““Huh...?””””

We were all speechless.

There was a city at the edge of the sand. Was that city where the demons were? But, no, that wasn’t the surprising part. Because of the height of our now-beached carrier, we had a good vantage point to look at the walls of the city before us. We were able to realize something we otherwise might not have.

It’s...the same as Parnam...

The walls of that city were in the same round shape as our royal capital’s.

“Parnam?! No, is that a different city?” Halbert questioned.

“But it looks just like the royal capital...” Ruby said.

The two had just joined us and were looking upon the same scene. It wasn’t just them here—we’d had the wyvern cavalry remaining on

the *Souryuu* fetch Juna, Tomoe, Ichihara, and Yuriga from the other ships too.

The walls, reminiscent of Parnam's, surprised me, but I already had an idea. Genia and the researchers had told me that the city of Parnam itself was possibly a product of overscience—a massive transportation device. If it existed to bring things from my old world, then it wouldn't be very convenient if there was just the one, would it? It wasn't that strange that they would have built multiple cities like it, or that the demons were using one of them too.

“And those are...forces of the demons, Souma?”

“Looks like it...”

Peering down from the *Souryuu*, there was a force of about ten thousand, all of them well-armed. Because they operated a weapon like Jangar, I was expecting them to have heavy firearms or laser guns, beam swords, and other futuristic weapons.

Instead, these troops were armed with swords, spears, and armor, and they had archers and mages quite similar to our own. In fact, given I didn't see any cannons, the demons' technological level appeared to be even lower than our own. They had a weapon like Jangar, yet individual soldiers were outfitted in medieval kit. That discrepancy caught my attention.

“They have a lot of heavy equipment. Is their enchantment magic not very advanced?” Juna said, analyzing the enemy formations.

Enchantments enhanced the base qualities of weapons and armor, which was why people in uniforms could fight against those in full armor in this world. Our own forces were divided into Liscia-type fighters, who focused on speed and wore an officer's uniform (plus additional armor in select areas), and Carla-types who focused on defense and power and wore heavy armor. However, if the demons were all using heavy armor, maybe they couldn't imbue their clothing with defensive enchantments. It really was looking like they had inferior technology.

“We can't let our guards down. We have a lot fewer soldiers than they do, after all,” I said just to keep anyone from getting ideas.

“Of course,” Juna said with a nod.

We probably only had a few thousand people on our side who could fight. Currently, we were deployed with the beached *Souryuu* as a fort, the two battleships that were transported as gun batteries, and the Marines defending them. With our numbers and equipment quality, we could probably repel the demons. Although, that was reliant on the mobile weapon Jangar not getting involved.

Jangar was currently towering above the demons like a massive statue.

“Aisha. Can you tell what races are on the demon side?”

“The horned ones are ogres, I suppose. But not warped, like the ones we saw in the Republic. More humanlike with a horn on their forehead. I also see armored lizardmen, but they’re like humans with tails, plus scales on their limbs,” Aisha said, one hand shading her eyes as she looked at them. “That leaves the ones with bat wings... They resemble monsters called vampires. Then there are orcs and kobolds. They look as you’d expect, but wearing armor.”

“Mr. Kobold...” Tomoe reacted.

Are these ones from the same group as the kobold that spared Tomoe and the mystic wolves? From what I was hearing, the demons didn’t have warped forms like monsters did. It was like someone took the beings we called monsters and made them more human. It felt like this further reinforced Genia’s theory that life originated in the dungeons, which we had expanded to postulate that monsters were failed products created by a bug in the process.

“Hmm...?” As Aisha surveyed the other side, she suddenly furrowed her brow.

“What is it?”

“There are what appear to be humans among the demon army.”

“What?!”

I looked at the demons too, but they were all just dots in my eyes. I really should have brought a telescope.

“So there are humans among the demon races too?”

“No, their numbers seem a little low to conclude that... Humans and beastmen tend to outnumber the long-lived races, so it’s strange to see so few of them.” Aisha crossed her arms under her breasts and groaned. “And their expressions concern me as well.”

“Their expressions?”

“Yes. Many of them appear frightened. They look almost like the defenders of a small castle, told a great army is coming to attack them. It’s as if they’ve worked up the courage to fight should they have to, even though it may be in vain.”

“Well, to these demons, we probably look like invaders.”

It seemed the demons were a lot different from how rumors painted them. I had this image of them as war-loving barbarians, pillaging towns and villages, then burning what was left. But maybe they weren’t so different from mankind. The last war must have been a case of escalating reprisals that got out of hand. If so, I wanted to do something to defuse this powder keg of a situation.

I turned to look at Madam Tiamat, who was standing nearby in human form.

“How long do we need to sit here like this?”

“I am sure she will contact you shortly... See?”

As if beckoned by her words, the black cube slowly descended

from the sky. It caused a great deal of chatter and excitement on the demon side. Some were shouting, while others sang and danced. I noticed them using the word “maou,” demon lord, frequently.

“They’re saying ‘It’s Lady Maou,’ ‘Lady Maou’s here,’ and, ‘It’s our di...something or other.’”

“You really do understand the demons’ language, huh?”

Tomoe had her ears perked up, and was interpreting what she heard, which impressed Yuriga.

It looked like Tomoe’s translation ability was working well. However, I, who could understand the common language of this continent when I was summoned, couldn’t make out any of it. I could understand the cube, but not the demons. That was another discrepancy.

Then a wavering in the air, like a heat haze, rose from the top of the cube once it landed on the ground.

“It is similar to the jewel broadcast...” Juna murmured.

She was right—it resembled when we used the fountain plaza receivers or Excel’s water magic to project a broadcast. *If so...what’s going to be projected?* As I watched, eventually an image appeared...

“Huh...?” I gulped without meaning to. All it was showing was a single girl.

But...could I really call her a person?

Here, in this place with over ten thousand soldiers, ourselves included, she was just so out of place that my mind went blank. I’d thought what I was seeing couldn’t be real several times before, but this one took the cake. The others had a different reaction though.

“A girl?” Aisha said questioningly.

“It’s cute, but isn’t it just a puppet?” Juna suggested.

“No, not a puppet. A picture? Though, calling her a picture seems weird too,” Naden chimed in.

“That’s the Demon Lord? She’s not quite what we were expecting, huh?” Yuriga commented.

“But the demons keep calling her Lady Maou, or something like that?” Tomoe replied.

“Her traits are those of a cute girl, but she’s not human... Is she perhaps a mannequin?” Ichiha wondered aloud.

Oh, right! None of them recognized what it was, so they didn’t know whether it was alive or not. Fair enough. Without prior knowledge, it would look like a moving picture, a doll...or maybe even a figure or a mannequin.

That’s the true form of Demon Lord Divalroi? Maou... Divalroi... Ah—
“Ahhhhh!!!”

“Whoa?!”

My sudden exclamation startled Naden. I didn’t let the dubious

looks everyone was shooting in my direction bother me as I leaned in to get a closer look.

No wonder it sounded familiar! It was just a program that read out the text you typed into it. But when they put a cute girl on the package and anthropomorphized the software, many people came to love her. She was a denizen of the digital realm, but eventually came to be called a digital idol, able to hold concerts in the real world.

She was a DIVAloid.

There were many DIVAloids created. One of the most popular of them had been a girl with green hair, pointy cat ears, bat wings, and an arrow-like tail. Her name was...

“DIVAloid MAO...”

Hold on. The Demon Lord Divalroi is a text-to-speech software from my old world? I was still working through my confusion when the 3D projection of Mao stretched her hand out towards me.

“I have been waiting for you, Lord Souma Kazuya.”

She spoke in a language I understood.

“I have waited so long for this moment. It has been ages since I was entrusted with the northern test subjects. So long that I am no longer able to carry out my duties. But now, at last, the familiar one I have awaited has come. Please, come to my main body. To close the door as soon as possible.”

With the appearance of Demon Lord Divalroi, aka DIVAloid MAO (henceforth “Mao”), war with the demons in front of us seemed to have been averted for now.

I took Aisha, Juna, Naden, Hal, Ruby, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga with me as we descended from the *Souryuu*.



Then, once we proceeded halfway to the demon's camp, the black cube—Mao—sent a number of demons forward too. *Is that large man with a doglike face a kobold?* There was a woman who looked like a vampire in armor, and a heavily armored lizardman too.

Behind them was a human with dark skin like Jirukoma or Komain's.

"They're rather diverse..." I said to myself.

"Our side isn't any less so," Juna noted, and I had to agree, now that I thought about it. We had humans, a beastman, dragons, a dark elf, and a celestial.

We ended up facing one another looking like a melting pot of different races. And Mao, whose projection was now human-sized, bowed her head to me.

"It is good of you to come, Lord Souma Kazuya. I have waited so long for this day to come. I would love to shake your hand, but..." With that, Mao extended her hand towards me. "As you can see, this form is only a projection. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, that's no problem, but...I've got a mountain of other questions."

"What might those be?"

"First up, that form is the DIVAlloid MAO, right? The anthropomorphization of a text-to-speech software?"

Mao nodded in response.

"Yes. This form is from that text-to-speech software that was popular on Earth in the 21st century. Even by the standards of the DIVAlloid series, MAO, was extremely successful."

"Okay... The demon lord being MAO and also a two-dimensional being...is already throwing my head for a loop. But you, the one speaking to us through that form—you're a separate entity, in a different place? Like the actor behind her?"

I asked that, thinking maybe someone was making Mao say all these things—like a person behind a moving avatar—but Mao just cocked her head to the side.

"That's sort of true, but also not. I'm like an AI that manages the northern test subjects, and I have no body. But when I'm communicating with organic lifeforms, it helps to have hands to express myself with, right? That's why I'm borrowing this appearance. This form is far from the uncanny valley and doesn't provoke feelings of unease in unknowing humanoids."

Erm... So Mao is an AI without a physical body, and she borrowed MAO's form in order to make contact with people like us... Is that it? The uncanny valley is an effect that happens when something seems too similar to a human and provokes unpleasant feelings, right? It's that thing where

people get scared of wax dolls or mannequins because they look too realistic. So she was deliberately using a blocky 3D character to avoid that?

“Um...sire? I’m struggling to understand what this person is saying.”

Aisha, who wasn’t much of a thinker, looked at me with eyes like someone had just plopped a big book of problems down in front of her. *Don’t worry, Aisha. I don’t really get it either. Wait... So, everyone can understand Mao, huh?* Was this my mysterious hero translation at work?

“Come to think of it, you called me Souma Kazuya, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yes. That is your name, is it not?”

“Ahh. It changed after I got married. I go by Souma E. Friedonia now.”

“Oh, I see. You were registered with me under your name at the time of summoning.”

“Registered...?”

How machine-like. I could see why she called herself an AI.

At this point, the big kobold who had been waiting behind Mao stepped forward.

“○○○○, ○○○○.”

He was saying something, but I couldn’t make it out.

I looked at the rest of my companions, but the blank looks on their faces told me it must be the same for them. That’s when the dark-skinned woman behind the kobold who appeared to be in her twenties started to speak.

“Garogaro is saying: ‘South people. Welcome. I am Garogaro. Representative of the north people.’”

Oh, she’s going to interpret for us? At this point, Tomoe stepped forward.

“Big Brother. It’s true, that kobold said, ‘Greetings, people of the south. I am Garogaro, the representative of the northern people.’”

“Oh?! You can understand Mr. Garogaro?” the woman said, her eyes widening.

Tomoe grinned. “I can understand because of my translation magic. You look human, so why are you with the demons?”

“Ah! Um...my name is Poco. After the monsters attacked from the north, I was wandering around, lost, when these demons took me in and brought me to their city. I was brought here because they needed an interpreter.”

Ohh... There are demons like that too, huh? Demons were intelligent life, just like mankind, so of course there were good and bad people among them too. Some were hostile to mankind because of the war,

but some of them were happy to help a person in need. That was rather humanlike behavior.

“△△△△, △△△△!”

The vampire woman in armor said something to Poco with a harsh expression on her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ms. Lavin,” Poco apologized to the vampire knight.

She was probably telling her off for talking in our language so much. Poco didn’t seem scared, so she couldn’t have been too harsh about it.

Poco gestured to the vampire knight and the lizardman. “Erm... This is Lavin Gore the vampire, and this is Kukudora the lizardman. They’re both important members of their respective races, so you can think of them as something like tribal elders.”

The lizardman extended a scaly hand.

“××××, ××××.”

“He says ‘Nice to meet you,’ Big Brother,” Tomoe said.

“Oh, uhh. Nice to meet you too,” I replied, shaking Kukudora’s hand.

It felt less like a lizard’s skin and more like a vinyl kaiju doll where the material had softened with age.

The vampire knight, Lavin Gore, said something to Mao.

“‘If this is the person we’ve heard of who can close the door, I believe it would be best to have him do so quickly,’ is what she’s saying to Mao,” Tomoe told me.

The door... Oh, yeah, she did say something about that.

Mao looked in our direction, extending a hand towards me. “Lord Souma. Please, come to my castle at once. To close the door.”

“What’s this door you keep talking about?”

“The gate we used to come to the world of the south. We used it to evacuate here, but had no way to close it behind us. That’s why the gate’s still wide open, and it’s calling northern monsters.”

“Northern monsters...” Ichiha murmured to himself. “I’ve heard that when the Demon Lord’s Domain appeared, ‘the door to another world opened, releasing vast amounts of monsters that would attack towns and villages.’ Is this that door to another world?”

“Ohh. I think I heard about something like that too, now that you mention it,” I said.

“Yes. In order to save my children, who were being pushed to the brink in the lands of the north, I had to let them escape into Tiamat’s jurisdiction in the south. However, while I was able to use unorthodox methods to connect the gate, I didn’t have the authorization to close it. You are the one with the right to do that, Sir Souma. You, a familiar one from the mother planet, and no one else,” Mao said, bowing her head deeply.

Seeing this, Garogaro, Kukudora, Lavin Gore, and Poco all bowed their heads too.

While I was still feeling confused, a soft voice spoke from behind me.

“Please, go,” said Madam Tiamat, who had apparently been standing there for some time without me noticing.

“Madam Tiamat?”

“She cannot stop it of her own will. Even if her children suffer, she also gave birth to their tormentors, so she cannot involve herself. If you can release her from her limitations, that will remove a source of suffering for people on this continent.”

“You always explain things in such a roundabout way...” I said, earning me a faint smile from Madam Tiamat.

“There are many limitations. Both on me and on her.”

Well...sitting around here wasn't going to help. I'd wanted to get in touch with the demons and communicate with them as peacefully as possible. If they were inviting me to come, I was getting exactly what I'd wanted.

I looked at Halbert. “Hal...can I count on you to manage the troops here for a while?”

“I don't mind, but...you're planning to go?”

“Yeah. First, I need to learn. Nothing can start until I know what's going on.”

Hal snorted. “Gotcha. Leave this place to me and Ruby.”

“You're a lifesaver... Mao...uh, Madam Mao? Can I take everyone who's here with me except for Hal and Ruby?”

Mao nodded. “Thank you, Lord Souma... Now, if I may.”

In the next moment, the scenery around us changed. The sun-scorched desert vanished, replaced by a dim, metallic room.

This room... It's got the same vibe as Genia's dungeon lab, huh?

Then Mao spread her arms and began to speak.

“Welcome, Lord Souma, to my heart.”

As she said that, a massive image appeared above our heads. It was a midair projection, like the ones used in the jewel broadcast. It showed a single planet, floating in space.

It was an all-too-familiar image of Earth.

As I stared, surprised and in awe, Mao quietly spoke.

“You will now learn how this world came to be, Lord Souma.”

Mao began to tell the tale in her cute DIVAlloid voice.





Chapter 10: How This World Came to Be

This world is a continuation of the world you once lived in, Lord Souma. In the old calendar, it would have been the start of the twenty-second century.

The steady progress of technology saw humanity acquire the ability to freely change the mass of atoms that make up objects. To put it simply: this was the technology Tiamat and her kind—the dragons—used when changing the size of their bodies. With the acquisition of this technology, mankind saw the same explosion in progress that must have occurred with the discovery of fire in ancient times. Any object could be increased in size with the same density of atoms, and any contraption, no matter how intricate, could be shrunk down to a size too small for the human eye to see.

The former was used to solve the issues of energy and food, while the latter was used to create all-purpose objects called “nanomachines” that could do anything. These discoveries served to massively increase the population of humanity, which had begun to decline. It’s fair to say that this is the era where mankind was at its most active.

With the issues of food and energy resolved, and nanomachines being put to work improving the soil and maintaining people’s health, problems that had been with mankind for all of our existence, like war and disease, were solved. Everyone watched these developments with excitement, wondering, “*What will happen next?*” and “*What new bright future awaits?*” Their hopes probably manifested with the uptick in the birth rate.

Furthermore, thanks to new ways of maintaining health through the use of nanomachines, the death rate plunged. That wasn’t all. By manipulating genes at the embryonic stage, people were able to significantly extend their lifespan... Yes, that’s right. That dark elf standing next to you. Her race, along with other long-lived races, is the product of that process. Naturally, just extending human lifespans on their own would result in explosive population growth, so they lowered the fertility of these new human races. With mankind

increasing their numbers through these sorts of adjustments, eventually, they grew to more than their previous highest population. And the expanded population resumed the expansion into space that had been delayed by their declining population.

Did mankind fight a war in space, like in manga and anime? That did happen at the beginning of the advancement into space. But during this new expansion, they had nanomachines. There was no need to build giant stations for humanity in space; they could spread nanomachines on a planet to give it a climate similar to Earth in a short period of time. In other words, terraforming. That said, as a matter of efficiency, they needed to start from zero when terraforming the moon, Mars, and other planets of the solar system. But when terraforming outside the solar system, they would choose planets that were already similar to Earth.

That's right... This planet you're on now is an extrasolar planet that's been terraformed. And it's also a place where many experiments were performed.

They did it to find the human race best suited to this planet for when our population overflowed out of the solar system. As I said earlier, the terraforming on this planet wasn't as complete as the terraforming they did on planets in the solar system. That's why they ended up doing experiments on a planetary scale.



“An experiment site...”

I'd heard about the northern test site and the southern test site before. Were those relevant here? There was a lot to think about. I'd just been fed more information than I knew how to respond to, and I felt like I barely understood the situation at hand.

I turned to gauge everyone else's reactions. Most of them were cocking their heads to the side.

“Madam Juna... Did you understand her?” Aisha asked.

“About half of it, yes. I lost her when she started talking about planets,” Juna replied.

“If Juna doesn't get it, then the rest of us never stood a chance,” Naden added.

Beside them, Tomoe turned to Ichiha and asked, “Did you understand, Ichiha?”

“Just barely... I got the gist of it, but I'm not sure I'm convinced,” he said. “I feel a bit...of dread at the idea that this planet was birthed by people who would be His Majesty's descendants.”

“Yeah... When you put it that way, it's not funny,” Yuriga chimed in. “We're being treated like animals for their experiments.”

Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga had been keeping up with the story

surprisingly well, perhaps due to their flexible thinking. And it seemed Ichiha in particular had an accurate grasp of the situation. He seemed to be feeling a sense of what you might call “cosmic horror.” The fear that there are entities that created us, and that may one day destroy us, has been demonstrated in works like those of the Cthulhu Mythos.

“There was mention of test sites. I remember you called this half of the planet Madam Tiamat’s test site, correct? Is that related somehow?” I asked, and Mao nodded.

“Dividing the test site into the north and south hemispheres was just another part of the test. In order to test what would result from differences between the administrators.”

As Mao said this, the world map as we recognized it was projected. It showed the continent of Landia with the Star Dragon Mountain Range at the center, as well as the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago and the two islands of the Spirit Kingdom, with a number of dots. What did the dots represent?

“Investigating what kind of human race was most suitable for this world. That required the use of samples to see which modifications were best.”

“Samples?”

“The races you call beastmen, kobolds, dwarves, elves, and other demi-humans. We were investigating which of them has best adapted to this planet. And the ‘test tubes’ we used in our experiment were what you call dungeons.”

““Dungeons?!”” Ichiha and I cried out in unison.

So dungeons are part of this too, huh? Did that mean that Genia’s theory that life originated in the dungeons was correct?

Mao continued her explanation.



I believe you’re aware that, so long as they have a dungeon core, dungeons will create a certain amount of life and maintain an ecological system inside them. Nearly all extant dungeons have malfunctioned, so they produce rejects... In other words: monsters—but they were originally test tubes used in the search for well-adapted demi-humans.

The original purpose of the dungeons was... Well, to give you an example: in order to see if that wolf beastgirl you have with you is suitable for this world, it would create her race, then create an ecological system inside the dungeon where they could multiply. If the race grew successfully, they would eventually find the inside of the dungeon too constraining. The bravest among them would venture outside, and if they could survive in the world, they would lead their race out with them.

That would mark the end of the dungeon's task for a while, and it would set about the next breeding experiment. This repeated process led demi-humans who could successfully breed and emerge from their dungeons to proliferate across both the north and south hemispheres.

Tiamat and I were the ones who managed the dungeons that created demi-humans.

In the northern hemisphere, I watched over my charges as a disembodied AI. Meanwhile, in the southern hemisphere, Tiamat was given a body—and in exchange for going through a process of death and rebirth, was allowed to leave her own descendants, managing the test site over many generations. Tiamat's kin—the dragons—and the dragonewts born through their intermixing with the other races, were created at this time. That's why they don't exist in the northern hemisphere.

Myself and Tiamat... Be that we live eternal lives or limited ones... Live in solitude or in clans... Investigating the impact of these sorts of differences was part of the experiment. This was all for the time when humanity, having grown too large, would one day come to this land...



Everyone was speechless.

There were simply too many shocking revelations. The purpose for all the demi-humans living in this world, the meaning of Madam Tiamat and Mao's existence... If word of this spread, it would throw society into chaos. It was a good thing I limited how many people came with me.

Still... Test subjects, huh? Were the monster and dragon bones we discovered in the royal capital traces of the dungeons creating life long ago? And they had destroyed themselves so long ago that no records remained other than fossils...maybe? So, basically, the bones we used to make Mechadra weren't from dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, but had been created for an experiment in a dungeon? Was that why no one got mad at us for using them to fight a giant creature?

Mao continued speaking.

"The environment of this planet gradually developed. Its inhabitable stature was proven when you were sent here from the past, Souma. You, who haven't received special demi-human abilities."

Well, if the environment hadn't been ready, I guess I would've just died when Albert summoned me. I shuddered a little thinking about it.

"But no matter how long we waited, old mankind never came..." Mao said, her expression saddening.

They never came? After putting a considerable amount of effort into terraforming the planet and going to the trouble of performing an

experiment with elves, beastmen, and the like?

“Maybe...there was a war between those living on Earth and those in space...or something like that?” I asked. *Like in anime.*

Mao shook her head. “No. It’s far less bleak, but more stupid than that.”

“Less bleak, but more stupid?”

“Yes. Old mankind simply lost their motivation.”



Once they had completely remade the moon and Mars in the image of Earth, mankind had an epiphany. From here on, it would just be the same thing ad nauseam. No matter how they increased their numbers, spreading their seeds across the universe, it would just be a rehash of the things they had done up to this point—a remake of their past history.

Mankind had been coming up with new ideas all this time in search of things they were lacking. Under capitalism, the wealthy prosper, and the desire to be wealthier than others is what drives people. Under socialism, wealth is divided to eliminate poverty. Both systems have their light and dark sides, but at their root, they both address the question of how people should live, and what will create the greatest happiness in a reality where there are differences between people.

But what if scientific progress made it so everyone was satisfied? So that every single person could live a life of plenty? What if, in the quest for greater wealth, there wasn’t much higher to go? What if there was no poverty? What if the only differences were as small as having two or three extra grains of rice to eat the next day? Would you go to war over such a tiny difference? Would you set off to distant stars just because of that? Would you try to grow your population to be superior to other nations? Would you want to make children in a society where you could control your own lifespans?

If there were some project that couldn’t be completed in your own lifetime, you might entrust it to future generations—but in a world where most things *could* be done in your own lifetime, would you want to make a family?

Do you understand what I’m getting at...? People try to do things because there are things they *can’t* do. It’s their nourishment in life. It drives their emotions and causes them to influence others. Lord Souma, there’s a difference in how long you and your dark elf and dragon wife will live. I’m sure you struggle with that. There’s a difference between you who will leave them behind, and they who will be left behind. You don’t want them to feel tied down to you. You want to at least leave them a family to be with. Those very human

emotions are born from your struggle against reality.

However, mankind, once they were satisfied, ran into a dead end there.

The human psyche needed to grow alongside scientific development, but the growth of the human spirit was too slow to keep up with science. As a result...mankind turned into shut-ins in the area around Earth.



“Huh? They turned into shut-ins?” I couldn’t help but echo that unexpected development back at her.

Mao nodded. “In the sense that they’ve lost the desire to go outside, and are satisfied to remain in their home, they’ve become shut-ins.”

“Uh, listen, I get what you’re saying, but...” This reminded me of how once you got used to delivery, you had less desire to go shopping as often. “The whole human race though, turning into shut-ins? That’s hard to imagine...”

“Science had gone as far as it could at that point, after all. They could even utilize the energy flowing through their bodies—the beating of their hearts—to create machines which could maintain themselves, so there wasn’t much reason for humans to work at all. In fact, it was a world where some saw their only value in life as acting as a battery for machines.”

“Okay, yeah, this is starting to sound like a utopia for shut-ins.”

We’d gotten to the point where the things being told were hard for me to imagine. I crossed my arms and cocked my head to one side.

“But if they had run out of inconveniences in their lives, wouldn’t they look to the outside to find more things that were inconvenient?”

In my own time before being brought here, there were people who grew tired of life in the city and went camping to enjoy the inconvenience of it.

Mao got an awkward look on her face. “You’re right, but with the development of VR technology, they were able to create virtual worlds that engaged the five senses in a way that was indistinguishable from reality. If they wanted to experience inconvenience, they could go to a virtual world to do that without risk to life and limb, and experience whatever inconvenience it was they liked as many times as they pleased. Whether that was living in a world of sword and sorcery like this one, or spending a lifetime in the Reiwa era you came from.”

“So... What are you saying?”

“I’m sure that mankind on Earth is providing their machines with energy while living in whatever virtual worlds they desire. Not in a dystopian way, like is depicted in your movies, but because they

themselves have chosen to immerse themselves in worlds of falsehoods.”

Wow, what a bunch of shut-ins... Was that really what happened to humanity in the future? Was there anything they couldn't do in a virtual world?

“Oh! What about family? Even if they fell in love and had children in a virtual world, that data isn't a real child, right? Was there no one who pushed back against that?”

“Virtual realities can be shared, so if they share sperm and eggs with the people they meet there, they can engage in romance in that virtual world, and have a real child created as a result. Although, because lifetimes are longer than they were in your era, they placed less importance on blood ties.”

“Right...”

“There were people who opposed this, of course. They would move to terraformed planets and begin living there. Those were the Lunarians that Lunarian Orthodoxy speaks of, and the ancestors of the humans living on this world. That said, due to intermixing with demi-humans, they have already become a new race distinct from the old humanity.”

I had no more objections. If I delved into this any deeper, I was going to start worrying that this world might be fake too, and that if Madam Tiamat or Mao told me otherwise, it was just because they were programmed to, so I decided it was best to stop. Besides, old mankind wasn't what Mao really wanted to talk about.

“I understand that old mankind never came. Now, I'd like to hear what it is *you* have to say,” I said. *What are the demons? And what are monsters?*

Mao nodded. “Because old mankind never came, this planet-sized test site was left to continue on as it was.”



I've already mentioned that experimental planets like this one were prepared with an eye to expanding the active domain of humanity due to explosive population growth. However, that prediction was off base, and humanity constrained itself to Earth and its immediate neighborhood, leaving planets like this alone. Even after being abandoned, we administrators continued the experiments because they were our reason for existing. That means we created dungeons, birthing races suitable for this planet for centuries, millennia, longer than you can imagine... Over and over...

Eventually, dungeons started to malfunction. They spewed out life that was clearly warped. That is what monsters are.

The monsters' bodies were rotting or appeared to be like

patchworks of other creatures because the malfunctioning dungeons have lost their ability to properly assemble life. Tiamat, the administrator of the south, was allowed to produce her own bloodline and renew herself over generations. Between generations, she succeeded in removing the program that made her create dungeons.

That must be why there's a limited number of dungeons in the southern hemisphere.

In the northern hemisphere, I was given the task of administering the region permanently, so I still create dungeons that malfunction, spewing out monsters. Worse yet, they've created a number of massive, powerful monsters of a sort that don't exist in the south. The north doesn't have a large continent like Landia; instead, it consists of countless islands, both large and small, but the intelligent lifeforms that are my children still found their domain gradually being eaten away by monsters. In the end, they were chased down to one last island. I couldn't bear to just watch anymore...

While it may be due to a malfunction, I was the one who gave birth to the monsters, so I didn't have the authorization to harm them. I could use that robot weapon to intercept the children of Tiamat, but I didn't have permission to attack monsters. That's why...clinging to one sliver of hope, I moved to the southern hemisphere with the surviving intelligent lifeforms. I hoped that Tiamat would destroy me, who was bound by my programming to keep on creating malfunctioning dungeons.

If I'm destroyed, at the very least, there won't be any new dungeons created in the north, and we can close the gate between the north and south.



"...That is how we came to appear in this land," Mao finished.

That was an incredible story. *Oh! That's why she attacked the Star Dragon Mountain Range, huh?* In order to have Madam Tiamat destroy her.

"You're saying you had that Jangar, but you still couldn't handle the monsters?" I asked.

"That Jangar wasn't meant for combat to begin with. Don't you think it would be strange for a weapon meant for practical warfare to look like a robot out of your anime?"

"Good point."

"That was a mock-up, one made to recreate the anime robot. Think of it like a museum making a replica of a trebuchet. Even if it's functional, it's just an antique, out of place in the modern era. That Jangar replica and that strange 'mobile fortress for siege warfare' were the only weapons at my disposal."

A replica, and a bizarre weapon... That's what the combined forces of mankind led by the Empire lost to? What would Maria think if she were here? They were made with tech from the far future, so they were still plenty threatening in this era. And despite having those things, the demons couldn't use them against the monsters.

"That means...the demons have been fighting the monsters directly? With the kind of old equipment they were wearing during our staredown with them on the coast?"

"Yes..."

They must have struggled more than I could imagine. It had to have been agonizing for Mao, being unable to lend them a hand. She was an eternal being, so she would've had to bear that pain for an incredibly long time. I could see why she was so desperate in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

Mao looked hard at me and said, "And yet, ten years after coming to the south, I found hope."

"Hope?"

"By that, I mean you, Lord Souma."

Me? My companions all turned and stared in my direction.

Mao continued, "You were called by the summoning system in Parnam...so you can stop me."



The Parnam summoning system was originally created to transport the large volumes of material and immigrants that were expected from Earth. To put this in terms that are easy for you to understand, Lord Souma, think of it as a massive 'Anywhere Door' with a time travel function. It could move people, material, and massive weapons like Jangar instantly here from Earth.

That said, most of the nanomachines that powered it have ceased functioning and now sleep deep underground. With the energy remaining around Parnam, it can only summon one person every few centuries. That's right. Using the rite of hero summoning is what called you here.

However, as I said before, the system was never used for migration because mankind on Earth turned into shut-ins. The system is no longer needed, but the humans who came here because they rejected the virtual world, and became the ancestors of the current humans on this planet, decided to leave it in place.

The original Tiamat, the other administrators who are remembered as god-beasts in various regions, and I are what we call the "old ones." We, and other systems, like the dungeons, are protected so that test subjects can't influence us. If the change of generations caused humans to lose their administrator rights, they

would have no ability to deal with a system that malfunctions like I have.

Because they were concerned about that possibility, the migrants built a city over Parnam, allowing it to amass energy through the daily lives of the inhabitants, and summon a human with administrator rights in times of crisis. In order to ensure the summoned individual would be able to communicate with the locals, they even went so far as to prepare a system that would let the person understand the local language, and made it so others could understand what the person said.



“Ah! So that’s how it is, huh!”

“Whuh?! Sire?” Aisha exclaimed, surprised by my own sudden exclamation.

“Oh, sorry. Listening to her story, something she said stood out to me.”

“It...did?”

“Yeah. In the past, I’ve thought about why my language ability is warped.”

The language ability the summoning system gave me wasn’t working quite right. I could understand the written language in this world and could read and write it. But spoken language was different. I could understand the local language, and Liscia and the others could understand my Japanese too. But they couldn’t pick up words that didn’t have equivalent concepts in this world, and they didn’t understand things communicated through song.

When Juna sang the songs she’d listened to from my phone, she was just reproducing the sounds verbatim. That meant it worked on the brains of the people I was speaking to. If it made it so I could speak the language, like how I could write it, there wouldn’t be any need for such a roundabout system. It seemed the summoning system desperately wanted to keep my language intact.

That was something I was able to infer when Mao said “supported language detected” in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. It made sense to me now: the reason for the hero summoning system, and why I was called to this world.

“Was I called here to do maintenance when you started acting up? And my Japanese was left intact because it requires a language from Earth.”

“You were called by the people of this world, not at our behest, but the rest is more or less as you’ve surmised. That’s why I invited you here. To have you terminate my functions now that I’ve developed a bug.”

This was why she'd asked me to "come north" back then? It sure took me a while...

"Is there any reason I was chosen? It sounds like anyone would have done."

"While it's true that you were called here by sheer coincidence, you were chosen due to a number of preexisting conditions. Firstly, the kind of people sleeping on Earth now, where bodily modifications have advanced so far, are not suitable as administrators. That said, it would be pointless calling someone from so long ago that they can't understand what we're talking about."

I nodded, and she continued.

"That means we need the person to be from the twentieth or twenty-first century, and a young person with no relatives who will cause minimal impact if they were to disappear. There might also be some fine tuning for a high level of communication ability or other factors in order to ensure we're able to understand one another too."

So I was just chosen at random from a list of people who would fit this world's needs? I was a product of coincidence, not destiny.

"That's...not really fair, now is it?" Juna said, looking at Mao harshly. "Even if he had no family, His Majesty had a house and a family grave, and probably friends too. It's just too cruel to tear him away from all that and write it off as a 'coincidence.'"

"Yeah," Naden agreed, nodding. "I'm glad he came to this world and we got to meet him, but it feels bad hearing about why it happened."

Aisha looked somewhat dissatisfied too. I was grateful for their concern.

Mao cocked her head to the side and looked at them. "We weren't the ones who called Sir Souma here though?"

""""Oh.""""

Come to think of it, she was right. It was the former king who called me, and Maria who put him up to it. Mao had no involvement in that at all. Albert and Maria were already part of the family too, so I was kind of out of people I could get mad at over it.

Whatever the case, I more or less knew what Mao wanted to use me for.

"I understand that granting your wish will lead to solving the problem of the Demon Lord's Domain. So what is it you need me to do first?" I asked.

Mao brought up a projection of the coastline. In the middle of the beach and ocean scenery, there was one space that looked all warped and wobbly.

"That is the gate we used to come south. This city was built for the same purpose as Parnam, but I used its functions to transport the

city itself. The hole that opened up in the process is still calling forth monsters from the north.”

“Ohh, that’s what they referred to as the gate to another world.”

Back at the beginning, I was told about a gate that appeared at the northernmost point of the continent and started spitting out monsters.

Mao nodded. “The northern and southern hemispheres were separate test sites, and normally it would be impossible for them to interfere with one another. The end of the northern sea is unexplored territory, but there is a perception interference field that prevents travel from north to south and south to north.”

“So our map was just the southern hemisphere...”

“Yes. And opening the northern gate twisted that law. Lord Souma. Please say, ‘I authorize you to close that transportation gate.’”

“What happens if I do...?”

“I will be able to prevent monsters from the northern hemisphere from coming through. That should also bring an end to the periodic outbreaks of monsters that you people refer to as the ‘demon waves.’”

“Huh?! The demon waves?!” Yuriga cried out in surprise.

“I can’t believe they can be solved so easily...” Ichiha said, blinking.

Come to think of it, when Ichiha and Yuriga lived in the Union of Eastern Nations, their countries were both on the verge of being destroyed by the demon waves. *I could end that horror by giving her permission...?*

Mao had said, *“The demon waves are a threat to us as well. Because I gave birth to the monsters, I cannot stop their invasion. Since I cannot use weapons like Jangar, the survivors from the north have been desperately hanging on in this one city.”* That must have been frustrating for her. Even if Mao here was an AI, she was made to have humanlike emotions, so she must have struggled with it.

I looked over to Madam Tiamat, just to be sure it was okay, and she nodded. I felt like she was saying, *“Please, make her wish come true.”*

“Got it... ‘Mao, I authorize you to close that transportation gate.’”

“Thank you.”

With that, the distorted area in the image instantly vanished. Now, all it showed was the beach and the sea. This was the moment when one of the problems confronting mankind disappeared without a trace.

“Was that...good?” I asked.

“Yes. It will do for now. The largest threat to my children’s lives is taken care of. Thank you so much,” Mao said with a smile.

Whoa, hold on. Did she just say “for now”? I thought. “Um... By ‘for now,’ you mean?”

“The malfunctions I’m experiencing need to be dealt with one by one. We’ve dealt with the most pressing issue, but if we don’t move on to the others, another even larger issue may eventually rear its head. This hasn’t changed the fact that the number of dungeons in the northern hemisphere is growing, and it’s turned into a crucible filled with monsters. If something were to open another gate, it would be the same thing all over again.”

“““ ”””

Didn’t that mean this was a deep-rooted problem that would take a long time to resolve? Mao smiled as I stared at her, speechless.

“It’s true that the problem will be hard to solve in the short term. But that doesn’t change the fact that the immediate crisis has been averted. You all must be tired, so please, stay in this city for a time. I’m sure you’re concerned for your wounded.”

“Huh?! Oh, yeah! Are Carla and the others okay?!” I asked.

Mao turned her palm upwards and gestured like a guide on a tour bus. “I will show you. Please, follow me.”

She led us to another wide-open space, different from the one before. The ceiling was high, and it was as spacious as Genia’s dungeon laboratory, but the massive thing occupying the center of the room made the atmosphere feel strangely oppressive.

Is this...a fishbowl? There was a tank that looked like a massive version of one of the roundish fishbowls that looked like an upside-down jellyfish. It was big enough that Naden could have fit in there in her ryuu form if she coiled herself up.

The massive tank was filled with a translucent green liquid, and there were countless people floating in it. Some wore Friedonian uniforms, others wore the pirate-style armor of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, and yet others wore the nomad armor of the Great Tiger Empire. Carla, who had gone down while protecting me, was in there with them.

“Carla!” I shouted, rushing over when I noticed her. *Weren’t they supposed to be treating her?! This is like they’re preserving her in formaldehyde!*

As I was thinking that, Mao appeared beside me.

“Please, don’t worry. These people are being treated.”

“Treatment? That’s what this is?”

“Yes. They are suspended in a breathable liquid medicine while nanomachines and a specially cultured chlorella algae are treating their wounds. This recovery system can heal a large number of people all at once. There may be scars left behind, but it will save them even if their hearts had recently stopped.”

“Okay then...”

I had no idea how this future tech worked, but if Mao said that

she could handle it, she probably could. I felt bad at the bit about there being some scars left, but as long as Carla survived, that was good enough. After all, if she died, I couldn't apologize or let her get mad at me.

Relieved, I bowed my head to Mao.

"Please, take care of them for us."

"Yes. You can count on me... Now then." After giving me a firm nod, Mao cocked her head to the side. "I am treating the soldiers of the other army at the same time as yours, Lord Souma, but are you sure you wanted me to do that?"

"Yeah... Please do. Heal Fuuga's soldiers as well."

If I only had her treat my people, Fuuga wouldn't take that lying down. It might get used as propaganda to say we were in bed with the demons. More importantly, letting Fuuga's men experience the benefits of the demons' technology might help prevent trouble in the future.

Aisha began counting on her fingers.

"Erm... We closed the door to the monsters in the north, and we've checked that Carla and the others are all right. The battle with the demons is on hold at the moment... Was there anything else?"

When she asked that, I crossed my arms and twisted my head around.

Things that were resolved, and things that weren't... I felt like there were very few objectives that existed between those two categories that we could act on now.

"Now that we know the state of the northern hemisphere, closing the door on it's not going to solve that problem, but...it does buy us time. It's not something we're able to do anything about immediately. I don't want to rush Carla and the others' treatment either... So, if there's one thing we can do now, it's put an end to hostilities and talk about what we can do in the future. Both of those will have to wait until we've joined back up with Excel and the main force though."

"Um," Yuriga raised her hand, "I think we need an explanation for my brother. There's going to be problems if we meet up as is."

She had a point. I didn't want him ruining the chance for dialogue.

"Let's contact him via broadcast... That's all we can do for now, I think?" I said.

"We're suddenly out of things to do, huh?" Juna said, putting a hand on her cheek.

We all looked at one another awkwardly. The problems we faced were unbelievably massive, yet we were already done with everything we could do about them immediately. It felt like we had too much time on our hands.

Mao chuckled and said, "Please, rest in these lands awhile, if you don't mind. We obviously don't have space for all those soldiers to stay, so they'll need to camp outside the walls—but a number of you will be welcome to come walk around the city."

"You sure? I'll give strict orders to my people not to cause trouble, but we did fight a war with you in the past, remember?"

"Yes." Mao nodded. "I expect my children will walk at your side for a long time to come, so I'd like to slowly build mutual understanding. To that end, you need to learn about us, and we need to learn about you."

"Got it..." I looked over to my companions. "You heard her. I'm going to go back to the carrier and contact everyone with the jewel. Aisha and Juna, you come with me."

"Yes, sir," Aisha said with gusto.

"Understood." Juna put her hands together over her heart and nodded.

Naden raised her hand, looking at me with some dissatisfaction. "Hold on, Souma... What about me?"

"I have a favor to ask of you, Naden," I said, plopping a hand down on top of her head. "I'd like you to guard Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga. I've got a job for them to do. I'll send Hal and Ruby with you as well, so protect them for me. Tomoe, Ichiha, Yuriga...you heard how it is, okay?"

""""O-Okay.""""

The three of them stood at attention, smiling wryly.

"I want you to go on ahead and scout out the city. You're all adults now, so instead of having you tag along with someone more mature, I want you to walk around on your own, learning what interests you, and what you think you ought to know. What you see and hear, and what you think about it, will have a direct influence on our national policy. Keep that in mind."

They weren't kids anymore. They weren't just tagging along with us either. It wasn't fair to expect them to stay where we could watch them. We were still bound together as family, but I was going to have to rely on the three of them as individuals in the future. It made me feel intensely aware of how time was going by—but, well...that was nothing to be negative about. It was proof that the next generation was growing up.

"I'm counting on you three."

"Yes, Big Brother."

""""Yes.""""

They all gave firm nods, and I turned to Mao, satisfied.

"Come to think of it...I haven't heard the name of this city yet, have I? What's it called?" I asked.

Mao looked straight into my eyes and answered. “This city was to be the ‘door’ that welcomed people from the mother planet, and so it was named Haalga.”

“Haalga...”

“Yes. I believe, if you trace them back, your Parnam derives from the same word.”

“Wha?! Parnam was supposed to mean that?”

Language drift turned it from Haalga to Parnam? That’s...a pretty shocking development, isn’t it? If Haalga meant door, like Mao said it did, then even if I was summoned by coincidence, it was an inevitability that someone would be summoned to Parnam. Thinking back to when I was summoned, I was struck by an uncanny feeling I couldn’t put into words.



Chapter 11: Reunited in Haalga

Mao's castle towered over the center of the demon city, Haalga. The city's layout was similar to Parnam's, with the castle sitting in the center of the round city walls, and main roads extending straight outwards from it. However, though they called it a castle, it looked like the trunk of a great tree or a massive pillar. Souma would have described it as looking like, "A colony that fell out of the sky, then got stuck in the earth, still standing up..."

The castle itself was aptly named Mao Castle. Combined with the city walls, it looked like a spinning top that was half-buried in the sand. Due to a lack of construction materials, many of the houses were made of stone, and though Mao had been able to use her power to secure a water source for them, the ground was turning yellow with sand that had blown in from outside.

If you weren't looking at it from the outside, instead peering down from a vantage point that let you see the whole city, it would be difficult to realize it had the same design as Parnam.

Looking at the group that had gathered in front of the entrance to Mao's castle, Naden murmured, "Uh, wow... This sure is some adventuring party we've got, huh?"

The group included the three Souma had sent ahead: Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga—along with their protectors Naden, Hal, and Ruby. These six were joined by the kobold Garogaro, who the demons had sent as a guide—as well as the vampire knight Lavin Gore, and Poco the human interpreter.

Incidentally, Kukudora, the lizardman who had been with them when they greeted Souma, was a creature of few words—something that was true both of him as an individual and his race in general—so he'd excused himself from acting as a guide because he was ill-suited to the task.

"I don't know how we managed to get such a mishmash of different races," Naden added with a sigh.

"Wait, *you're* one to talk," Ruby responded, unable to resist poking fun at her.

There were three humans, a beastman, a celestial, two dragons

(one was a ryuu), a vampire, and a kobold—which made for a mishmash of races that all looked quite different from one another. The group was even more diverse than Souma’s wives, a group that already included a lot of unique members.

“○○○○, ○○○○,” Garogaro said.

“●●●○, ●●●○!” Poco quickly corrected.

“○○○○, ○○○○?” Garogaro cocked his head to the side.

Everyone but Tomoe and Lavin Gore had no idea what they were talking about.

“It sure is inconvenient not understanding each other’s languages,” Yuriga said, crossing her arms.

“Yeah,” Tomoe agreed with a wry smile. “They’re not saying anything that important though. Poco was translating Naden and Ruby’s words for him. Garogaro said, ‘It’s certainly true that a lizardman with deer horns is unusual,’ and Poco said, ‘That lady is apparently a dragon.’ Cocking his head to the side, Garogaro replied, ‘A dragon? There are dragons like that in the south?’ And...that’s about it.”

Ruby, who was listening to Tomoe’s explanation, smirked at Naden. “Hmm. A lizardman, huh? That’s what he called you, Naden.”

“Hee hee, you haven’t tried to provoke me like this in a while...” Naden glowered at Ruby, who stared back at her with a bold smile. “If it’s a fight you want, I’m more than happy to give you one, you know?”

“Bring it. I’ll show you what us military folks can do.”

“Don’t underestimate a working weather girl who is loved by the people of Parnam, okay? If I talk to the folks in town, you’ll never be able to go shopping there again.”

“Why are you so weirdly popular with the common people...?”

As Naden and Ruby glared at each other, engaging in a bit of their old antics, Halbert hurriedly stepped in to stop them.

“Stop it, you two. The demons are watching,” Halbert warned.

““Hmph!””

They both looked away peevishly.

When Lavin Gore heard what Halbert said (with Poco’s translation) she glared at him and said, “△△△△, △△△△.”

“Huh? What? Did I say something to offend her?” Halbert asked, looking to Tomoe for help.

Tomoe nodded with a wry smile.

“Erm... Lavin Gore says, ‘Calling us demons is the same as calling us monsters. It’s insulting.’”

“Huh? Oh... Sorry. I apologize.”

Halbert meekly bowed his head, and Lavin Gore looked surprised, before angrily turning her head to the side. Halbert didn’t seem to get

what that meant, so Garogaro explained it to him with some translation help from Poco.

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (Poco’s Translation: She wasn’t expecting an apology, so she doesn’t know what to do with her anger now. We were enemies until just recently, and it was a delicate situation. She must be on edge, feeling she can’t let herself be taken lightly.)

“I see... That was even more thoughtless of me then,” Halbert replied, scratching his head awkwardly.

Ichiha, who had been listening, got a pensive look on his face and said, “It’s a thorny issue. We don’t know each other’s languages, and we don’t know what the other side will be offended by. We’re so used to speaking our common language that we don’t have any experience speaking foreign ones.”

“Most countries’ languages are just dialects of the common language, like merchant slang. That makes it convenient when we negotiate though,” Yuriga added.

“The only real foreign language we hear is Big Brother’s,” Tomoe chimed in. “But the hero’s mysterious translation ability makes it so everyone can understand him.”

Ichiha nodded. “For now, let’s report that being called demons upsets them. Could you ask them, ‘What would you prefer we call you instead?’ Tomoe?”

“Sure. I can do that.”

Tomoe asked Ichiha’s question, and Lavin responded with pride. “△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: Our homeland in the north was a world with vast seas and many islands, big and small. So we called ourselves the people of the sea, or Seadians.)

“Seadians...?”

“△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: We were told by Mao that this world, unlike the world of the north, has one large continent, so we call you the people of the land, Landians.)

“““Landians?!””” Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga all cried out in surprise at once.

Naden, Halbert, and Ruby looked at the three of them sideways.

“Is it that much of a surprise?” Naden asked.

“It’s a *huge* one!” Tomoe exclaimed. “What’s the name of the continent we live on?”

“Landia?” Naden replied with a dubious look. “Ohh, yeah, it is similar, huh? Or exactly the same?”

“Yes. The etymology *must* be the same,” Tomoe said, sounding emotionally affected by this discovery. “Our parents and teachers taught us that this continent is called Landia. But no one knew where the name came from. Now, after talking to the de—Seadians, I know that our continent’s name means land.”

“When information is unclear, there can be all sorts of interpretations,” Ichiha noted. “I’ll bet there’ve been many countries that used that for political ends or propaganda. This pulls back the veil of mystery just a little.”

“And the scary thing is, there’s probably more to come,” Yuriga added. “I’ll bet there’s a lot of things we could piece together by combining what we know with what the Seadians know. Both good and bad.”

““““O-Oh, that makes sense...””””

Naden, Halbert, and Ruby all nodded, very impressed with this explanation.

They could see why the trio from the Royal Academy had been surprised. Intercultural communication didn’t just face the language barrier—there could be issues like this too.

Those of the Kingdom party nodded, realizing they’d need to submit a thorough report to Souma.

“For now, we can call them Seadians, and ourselves Landians, okay?” Naden suggested. “Those words don’t seem so bad.”

Everyone agreed with her suggestion.

Then Garogaro, who had been watching this exchange, spoke up.

“○○○○, ○○○○?” (TL: Excuse me. It seems to me that you understand our language, young lady?)

“Oh, yes. My magic lets me communicate with people and animals,” Tomoe explained, causing Garogaro’s eyes to widen.

“○○○○! ○○○○, ○○○○?” (TL: My word! Come to think of it, you have wolf ears and a tail... Have you spoken to a kobold before, perhaps?)

Tomoe’s eyes widened before Poco could finish interpreting for the others.

“Yes. It was a kobold who saved us when we were in danger many years ago... Do you happen to know him?”

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: So I was right... Young miss, I have a request.)

“A request?” Tomoe asked, tilting her head to the side.

Garogaro gave a deep nod of his head.

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: Yes. Please come to our village and meet with our baatar.)



While Tomoe and the others were heading to the castle town, we were in a room aboard the beached island carrier *Souryuu*.

“So, that’s more or less the situation, I guess.”

The projected images of Liscia and Hakuya were speechless.

Aisha, Juna, and I had used the jewel aboard the carrier to call

Liscia in Parnam and give her a report on the situation. Hakuya was there too, because we'd had him come from the Euphoria Kingdom in case anything unexpected happened.

It was hard telling them about what happened to Carla, as well as the partial destruction of one of our island carriers, but there was no point in hiding it, so I relayed that information straight.

"Well, if we consider the damage to the *Souryuu* the cost of it protecting you and the rest of the fleet, I suppose you could say losses were kept to a minimum," Hakuya said, recovering faster than Liscia.

Then, coming back to her senses as she heard him speak, Liscia got up so close to the jewel that I thought she was going to jump out of the projection.

"Forget about that! Is Carla okay?!"

"Y-Yeah! She is..." I nodded, wincing a little as Liscia shouted.

"They're treating her now. Mao tells me her life's not at risk."

"Oh... Thank goodness..." Liscia looked relieved, then quickly shook her head. "No, this isn't the time to be happy about it. There are people who really did die out there."

She was right. It wasn't okay to be happy just because someone close to us survived. Carla and the others Mao had taken survived, but there were many who weren't as fortunate. There were many who didn't get off with just heavy wounds; a number were atomized by the beam weapon, and many sank to the bottom of the sea. Their deaths were my burden to carry.

"This was all my fault... I let Fuuga's momentum make me put our fate in his hands. If I'd handled things better...maybe we wouldn't have lost all those people."

"Souma..."

"But there's no time for regrets. We need to hurry and decide how to handle things from here on."

"That's right," Hakuya replied with a nod. "We must decide on how to deal with the demons and Fuuga before there's any more unnecessary friction between us. Save your regrets for after that."

"Yeah, I know..." I agreed. "Liscia."

"What?"

"When I get back, I want you to really tell me off," I said, a serious look on my face, and Liscia smiled a little.

"Yes, of course. Just make sure you all come home safe."

"Okay."

It was reassuring just to know there was someone at home waiting for us.



"Is...this the place?" Tomoe asked.

They were on the northern outskirts of the castle town.

“Yes,” Garogaro replied to her, nodding. “This is the district we kobolds live in.”

Looking around, the women standing out in front of the houses talking, and the children running around on the road all had dog ears and tails. The women’s exposed skin was covered in sleek fur, and the men had doglike faces on top of that.

The group from the Kingdom was used to seeing Tomoe and Inugami, so they weren’t put off by any of this. However, they were confused by how hard it was to tell the difference between kobold, dog, or wolf beastmen.

It’s hard to tell the Seadian kobolds from Landian dog beastmen. If you set those concepts aside, it’s difficult to identify them by sight alone... Is this what His Majesty was concerned about? Ichiha thought to himself. Souma and Hakuya had told him and Yuriga about all the potential problems they expected might arise when they eventually met the demons. That included the lack of distinction between beastmen and demons.

“Garurun Baatar!” Garogaro called out as they stood in front of one of the stonework houses. “○○○○, ○○○○!” (TL: Are you home?! It’s Rugaruga’s son, Garogaro! There’s someone here I want you to meet!)

A deep voice from inside the house responded, “□□□□? □□□□, □□□□.” (TL: Garogaro? You can come in.)

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: We’ll do that then. Come on, guests, I’d like you to come in with me.)

Tomoe and the gang went inside at Garogaro’s urging.

It was a little dark in the stonework house, but a soft light shone in through the open holes that served as windows. In it, they could see an elderly kobold in a rocking chair. His long, overgrown hair gave away his age and hid his eyes and chin. If Souma were around, he would have said the elderly kobold looks like a Yorkshire terrier.

The old kobold lifted the hair out of his eyes with one hand to look at them.

“□□□□, □□□□.” (TL: You’ve come with a rather large group today. It’s not just you and the wife?)

“Huh? Wife?” Naden cocked her head to the side in confusion, following the translation.

Poco hung her head shyly, explaining, “Um, you see...Garogaro and I are married.”

“Wha?! You are?! ” Naden blurted out.

“△△△△, △△△△,” (TL: There’s nothing strange about that.) Lavin said, crossing her arms. “△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: We took Poco in after she was attacked by monsters. There are many Landians like

her living here in Haazar, and it's been nearly twenty years since our arrival. It's only to be expected there would be some intermarriage.)

"But I heard mankind and you, um...Seadians fought an intense war. And that there were massacres, rapes, and more," Naden said.

"△△△△, △△△△." (TL: I'm not going to deny those things happened. But Landians committed atrocities against us as well. It was a war, after all.)

"It seems this is an example of the problems that can arise from seeing monsters and Seadians as the same, like His Majesty told us," Ichiha said, summing things up.

He was talking about the theory that mankind had seen the Seadians as no different than the monsters, and had been eliminating them like they would dangerous animals, then stumbled into a total war situation without realizing it. Considering what had happened so far, it appeared that mankind had ended up attacking the Seadians while they were fighting monsters, and then Mao's super weapons wiped them out.

"△△△△, △△△△." (TL: It's true that some of us massacred Landians... But they were held to account for their crimes after the war.)

"Oh, I see... Umm... Sorry."

"△△△△, △△△△." (TL: No, it's nothing you need to apologize for...)

Naden and Lavin Gore both had awkward looks on their faces.

The elderly kobold, Garurun, looked out the window and murmured, "□□□□, □□□□." (TL: We were all so desperate to survive, but so were the Landians. Perhaps we should have stayed in the lands of the north. Did we only extend the path of destruction into the south?)

"○○○○, ○○○○!" (TL: What are you saying?! A baatar like yourself?! You've stood at the vanguard, leading us to survival all this time, haven't you?! Don't deny your own accomplishments!) Garogaro shouted, unable to listen any longer.

Yuriga whispered in Poco's ear, "Hey, I've been wondering, but what's a 'baatar'?"

"I'm told it means 'hero'... Garurun Baatar is retired now, but led the kobolds for a long time."

Garogaro stood tall and proud.

"○○○○, ○○○○." (TL: And you didn't just spread misfortune around. Didn't you say, 'Once, long ago, I warned those with wolf ears and tails about the coming danger.' You helped them to escape a monster attack.)

"□□□□, □□□□." (TL: Even when I did that, it was self-serving...to make myself feel better. It's not as though I stayed with

them until the end. I can't even say for certain that they survived.)

“○○○○, ○○○○, ○○○○!” (TL: Baatar, you can be proud! This girl here, with the wolf ears and tail, is one of those you saved! And she says that understanding the kobold language is what saved her life!) Garogaro said, pointing at Tomoe.

When he heard that, Garurun was shocked, and was silent for a moment. But then his jaw dropped, and his eyes widened so much that you could tell even behind his thick fur.

“□□□□, □□□□.” (TL: Her...? The one I spoke to was a much smaller girl, but... No, it's been that long, hasn't it? It's true, if she were alive today, she would be about this girl's age...)

“○○○○. ○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: Baatar. This is the very same girl that you saved that day.)

“□□□□, □□□□?” (TL: But why is she here? Did she not escape to the south?)

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: You must have heard an army came from the south. The one who Lady Mao told us of—who had the authority to close the gate. That gate which tormented us all this time is now closed. And she is that man's honorary little sister who came to this land at his side.)

“□□□□, □□□□?” (TL: Young lady, would you come over here?)

At Garurun's beckoning, Tomoe went over and knelt in front of him. As she did, he reached down, cupping her face with both his hands as he sat.

“You're the young lady from back then?”

“Yes.”

“Ohh! You understand our language. There can be no doubt then.”

“Yes. Thank you...for saving me, my family, and the entire mystic wolf race.”

Tears in her eyes, Tomoe gently put her own hands on the furry ones that were touching her face.

“All this time... I've wanted to say thank you. It's because of you that I, my family, and everyone is okay. Because you saved us, we were able to meet Big Brother, and I'm able to be here today.”

Tomoe had played a major role in Souma's reign. She had helped set up an environment for raising rhinosaurs for the rhinoceros train, and with increasing the number of wyverns that they could load on the island carriers. She was also the one who discovered Ichiha in the Union of Eastern Nations, and it was questionable if Yuriga would have come to the Kingdom if Tomoe weren't there.

If not for Tomoe, the Kingdom of Friedonia might not have grown into the great power that it has become. It might not have been able to travel to the Demon Lord's Domain as an equal to the Great Tiger Empire of Haan. If Tomoe hadn't made it to the Kingdom, this future

might not even have been possible. Without a doubt, Garurun was the one who had helped make it happen.

Garurun's beady eyes moistened. "Oh, I see..." he murmured. "Then everything I did was not in vain."

"Not at all! I'm happy and healthy thanks to you!"

Tomoe gave him a smile more radiant than the sunlight streaming in through the window.



"□□□□, □□□□!" (TL: Ga ha ha ha! Come on, drink up, young'un!) Garurun said, raising his cup.

"S-Sure... Here goes."

Halbert was in a pub drinking with Garurun, who had his arm around his shoulders. When they first met him, Garurun had seemed old and infirm, but meeting Tomoe seemed to have given him a new lease on life, and he'd turned into a jovial old man like Owen. He was now cheerfully drowning himself in alcohol.

He had wanted to drink with Tomoe to celebrate, but she, Ichiha, and Yuriga had chosen to forgo any alcohol, citing that they had to make reports to their king later, so he'd captured Halbert as a substitute.

Ruby was watching them with concern.

"H-Hey? Is that really okay?" Ruby asked Garogaro, but the kobold was tearing up.

"○○○○, ○○○○." (TL: Our baatar was exhausted after his long struggle, but now he's so cheerful... Ohh, what a joyous day this is.)

"Ah... I'm so happy for you, Garogaro." His wife, Poco, had been moved to tears too, and was wiping the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.

There was a real difference in how emotional the Landians and Seadians were. Lavin Gore, the only Seadian who was still keeping a level head, sipped away at her drink as if she wanted no part of this. Naden furrowed her brow at the vampire.

"Hey, are you sure you should let them carry on like that?"

"△△△△, △△△△." (TL: Kobolds are known for their strong emotions... Honestly, I can't keep up with them.)

"Right, yeah... I know how you feel."

"Ah ha ha... But you're a human, right, Poco?" Ichiha asked, smiling wryly.

Poco nodded, tears still in her eyes. "Yes. I was originally from a nomadic tribe in the wastes, but I was separated from my family and tribe when the monsters attacked... As I was wandering, I was eventually attacked by a monster, but Garogaro and his people rescued me. I hope my people are okay..."

Poco lowered her face, looking a little lonely. Garogaro put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. They seemed like a good couple who cared for one another.

Then, Tomoe had a realization. “Poco, you have rather dark skin. It reminds me of some people I know, like Jirukoma and Komain. Maybe you’re from the same tribe?”

“Oh! You know our chiefs?!”

Poco leaned in closer. Tomoe backed away, intimidated, and nodded repeatedly.

“Yes. They led the refugees south and arrived in the Kingdom of Friedonia...or rather, the Elfrieden Kingdom, which was its name at the time. I was a member of their refugee group, and they took really good care of me... So you’re saying they were the chiefs of your tribe?”

“Yes. I am from Jirukoma’s tribe. Um, were there other people with dark skin in the refugee group?”

“Erm... It was a really large group, so I’m unsure how many there were, but I did see a lot of them.”

Poco looked relieved to hear that.

“Oh, I see... So they managed to make it south...”

“○○○○, ○○○○?” (TL: Isn’t that great, Poco?) Garogaro asked.

“Yes!” Poco replied with a smile.

As things were calming down a bit at this unexpected but happy news, Ichiha opened his mouth to say, “His Majesty asked us to find out more about the world of the north and how the Seadians live. Could you tell us what you know?”

“I guess the first question should be if there are any Seadians other than the ones living in this city, right?” Yuriga said, but Garogaro shook his head.

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: We don’t know that either. All we know is that we’re the only ones who made it here...)

“Hm? What does that mean?” Ichiha asked.

“△△△△, △△△△,” (TL: I already told you. The world of the north, which we came from, was a world of islands and the sea.)

Lavin Gore answered on Garogaro’s behalf.

“△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: There were hundreds of medium- and large-sized islands in our world, and countless more small ones—both scattered across the sea and clustered close together in some places. They could be so close that the sea between them looked like a river, and sometimes there were vast stretches of water. That’s the kind of world it was.)

“It sounds like our Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago,” Yuriga commented.

“Yeah.” Tomoe nodded in agreement.

“△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: The endless monster attacks forced us to flee from island to island. There’s no way to know how all the other Seadians are doing. It’s possible some were left behind, and they’ve shut themselves away somewhere. With some luck, there might even be islands that have been spared from the monsters’ attacks.)

“In a sense, the Seadians are refugees too, huh?” Yuriga wondered.

“Yeah,” Ichiha agreed. “What can you tell us about your lives in this city? Have you been able to support yourselves?”

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: Thanks to Lady Mao, we’ve been able to grow crops inside the city. We eat those, our livestock, and any edible monsters that attack us.)

“Are you able to tell which monsters are edible without an identification system like Ichiha’s?” Yuriga followed up. “Or are your stomachs just so hardy you can eat any monster?”

Lavin Gore gave an exasperated shrug.

“△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: Just how long do you think we’ve been dealing with monsters for? It’s simple for us to tell which ones are edible and which aren’t.)

“You must have accumulated far more experience with them,” Ichiha said, sounding impressed. “It was only around twenty years ago, when the Demon Lord’s Domain appeared, that we first faced the threat of monsters outside the dungeons. But you Seadians have been facing them far longer than that. The knowledge has been passed from parent to child, master to apprentice, and naturally been refined over time. Which means...”

“They’re on a different level than us, huh?” Yuriga said, satisfied with the explanation. The Seadians had likely already developed a monster identification system based on their own experiences.

Lavin Gore smiled boldly.

“△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: The monsters were a threat, but they were also exciting to hunt. After every hard-won battle with new types, we’d think about what to do with their remains. Although, when our losses were heavy, it was hard to think that way. Those with the power to fight could enjoy it, but those without were in a constant state of danger, after all.)

“Hold on... That sounds like...” Yuriga had a look on her face like she had realized something.

“Yuriga?”

Tomoe was about to ask her about it, but Ichiha spoke first, asking Garogaro, “I wanted to check. Do the Seadians want to go home to the world of the north, or is it your hope to settle here permanently?”

“○○○○, ○○○○.” (TL: If we can go back, we want to. The world of the north is our true homeland.)

“△△△△, △△△△,” (TL: But even if we returned now, it would take a lot of work to rebuild in the areas overrun by monsters. Pathetic as that is to admit.) Lavin Gore said with a mocking laugh at herself. “△△△△, △△△△.” (TL: If you say your king’s closed that accursed gate, then the people of Haazar will know peace for a time. Assuming no Landians attempt to steal this last city from us.)

“Ohh... Yeah. I guess so, huh?” Yuriga looked like she’d bitten into something unpleasant.

She must have been remembering her brother. If Fuuga meant to continue the war, that would close off the path to reconciliation between the Landians and Seadians that had finally opened.

After a moment, Yuriga let out a long sigh.

“Well, we’re going to have to rely on negotiations between my brother and my reliable husband at this point. I’ll do what I can to make reconciliation possible too, of course.”

“Yuriga...” Naden looked a little miffed. “I appreciate the sentiment, but...just remember, he’s *my* husband too, okay?”

Realizing Naden had been annoyed at hearing her use the word “my,” Yuriga hurriedly shook her head.

“I-I know that, Lady Naden.”

“Well, we’re good then.”

Everyone chuckled at that little exchange.

They could feel the heavy atmosphere that had been starting to settle over the room lighten. But...

“□□□□, □□□□!” (TL: Booze! We’re gonna drink ’til the cellar’s empty!)

“Don’t overdo it, old-timer! Oh, jeez, someone help me stop him!”

There was one person who was already totally sloshed. They all looked at one another, exchanging wry smiles as they listened to Halbert’s pitiful cries for help.



Chapter 12: Blood Kin

“Landians and Seadians, huh?”

In the room that had been prepared for us in Mao’s castle, I was smacking myself in the head as I read Ichiha’s report, which Yuriga had brought to me.

With regards to the issue of what we should call the demons, we had settled on calling them “Seadians” for now. Some of the Seadians wished to return home, while others just wanted someplace safe to live. They were a lot like the band of refugees led by Jirukoma and Komain. Actually, considering the sequence of events that brought the Seadians to Haazar, the Seadians essentially were refugees. That being the case, we could probably handle this situation the same way.

If they insisted on going home, we’d drive them out. If they would consider this world their new home, we’d accept them. The only difference was that this time we’d be driving them out into monster-infested territory, so they weren’t going to go easily. It’d be suicide for them to head back north with just their best soldiers. That meant they couldn’t leave, even if they wanted to—and if we tried to force them out, they’d hole themselves up inside Haazar.

The tense situation between us and the Seadians was going to continue. I wanted to put off forcing them to make a decision until we could at least set up systems to support their return, but...there was a big problem with that.

“The question is...if I can convince Fuuga...”

Now that Fuuga had raised his fist, he was likely looking for a satisfying reason to lower it. He’d gathered an army in the name of fully liberating the Demon Lord’s Domain, so he needed an accomplishment that equated to such an endeavor. Until he had one, he couldn’t really take the Seadians’ plight into consideration.

Thinking of how to end the war is already enough of a headache as is... I thought, sighing.

“Erm... Sorry,” Yuriga, who was beside me, apologized.

“Oh, my bad. I don’t want to blame you for this, Yuriga.”

“But it’s all because of my brother.”

“Hopefully, Fuuga understands the focus of the issue has changed

too.”

We *did* manage to close the gate in the north, but the situation in the northern hemisphere remained unchanged. There was no telling when the wall between north and south might break down, allowing a great surge of monsters to push southwards. It had already reached the point where the world of the south couldn't handle things on its own.

Yuriga brought a hand to her mouth as if thinking about something.

“Yeah... The problem *has* changed. So maybe my brother will...” she pondered.

“Hm? What is it?”

“No. It's nothing.” Yuriga shook her head.

What was that about? Well, whatever. I sighed and looked up to the ceiling again. “Madam Mao. If you're listening, could you come here?”

“Is something the matter?” Mao replied, suddenly appearing before our eyes.

“Whuh?!” Yuriga doubled back in shock.

Mao was a projection, a data entity, and this region itself. She was probably aware of anything that happened in this castle.

“We fixed your bug, right? Can you take the Seadians back north on your own now?” I asked, but Mao shook her head apologetically.

“I'm sorry. With your help, I was able to close that gate and terminate the function that was causing me to create new dungeons, but it's an error that developed over a long time... As a result of aging, you might say, I can't be sure when I might cause another dangerous situation. It might be fastest to shut me down outright, but that would mean abandoning my children, so...I need to stay active a little longer.”

It sounded like they needed Mao to maintain this city, else the Seadians would struggle to survive without defensive systems like Jangar. Mao had attempted to destroy herself for their sake before, but now that wasn't an option for her.

Besides...when she looks like a girl and she acts all troubled like this, I can't help but sympathize with her, you know?

If a machine bugs out and becomes a threat to people, it should be destroyed. But because her projection looked human and expressed her worries like one would, it became a lot harder to suggest scrapping her. Did Mao's creators give her the form of a DIVAloid in order to make people feel this way about her? Do Astro Boy and Doraemon have lives and minds of their own? Is it right for a human to risk their life for a machine? I never expected the day would come when I was forced to ask myself those kinds of sci-fi questions.

Mao looked straight at me.

“However, by solving the most pressing issues, we’ve gained the time to think things through. Also, I’ve collected your voice and genetic sample, so you can transfer the authority to shut down my functions and some other limited capacities to those who share a certain amount of your DNA.”

“Wait, you don’t mean Cian and my other children, do you?!”

“Yes. Your descendants, within a certain degree of kinship, will have the ability to place restrictions on me.”

Seriously? So it isn’t just me? Cian, Kazuha, Enju, Leon, Kaito, and all my unborn children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren could all get caught up in this?

“If the countries of the south decide to set out for the northern hemisphere, then they’re going to want someone of your line, Souma,” Yuriga said, calmly analyzing the situation. “If they can’t have you specifically, they’ll want one of your children.”

“This isn’t funny. Jeez.” I clutched my head.

The Nine-Headed Dragon Kingdom wouldn’t be an issue because Cian was already engaged to Princess Sharan. However, Kuu—the Head of the Republic—had been saying he wanted formal marriage ties with us, and I’d told him I’d consider it once he actually had a child. As for the Euphoria Kingdom, Maria had married into our family, so that would be enough for them as long as we had children, but...what about all the other countries? The Dragon Knight Kingdom and Spirit Kingdom both were friendly towards us, or felt indebted to us, so they were fine. It’d be dangerous if the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State came after the children though. *But most urgently...*

I looked at Yuriga, who began awkwardly scratching her cheek as she figured out what I was thinking just by that glance.

“Well, my brother’s going to want us to hurry up and make a baby, I’m sure.”

I’ll bet... The largest potential problem was the Great Tiger Empire of Haan. If Fuuga was interested in the northern hemisphere, he’d definitely want to have one of my descendants. Should I have a child with Yuriga, he’d probably want to have custody of it, and if we didn’t have children, he might go after one of my other kids. Either way, it couldn’t be more of a hassle.

“I wish he’d give me a break...” I grumbled.

“I don’t think he will. I mean, I just started thinking about maybe having a baby after I heard what she said...”

“Wha?!”

I looked at Yuriga in shock, but she simply shrugged.

“I still support my brother’s dream. I know I said we’d marry so I could beg for his life if he fails, but well... If my brother decides to take an interest in the northern hemisphere instead of uniting the

continent...I think I'd be willing to help him with getting one of your children if he really needs one. That would also protect the Kingdom of Friedonia."

How incredibly pragmatic of her. I had no idea what to say. She was a lot like Liscia when it came to this.

"But do you think his retainers or people would be willing to accept a sudden change in direction like that...?" I questioned.

"Yeah, that's the thing..." Yuriga let out a knowing sigh.

Beyond Fuuga's ambition of completely liberating the Demon Lord's Domain was the great work of unifying the continent—a feat no one had ever accomplished. It was likely what Fuuga had been aiming for all this time, and his vassals and people must have been hoping he might pull it off.

If he said he was going to some northern hemisphere they had just discovered, what would all those people think? Wouldn't they feel their hopes had been betrayed? Would Fuuga lose the incredible charisma that was holding his massive empire together?

Yuriga crossed her arms and groaned. "Hrm... I don't think he'd change course immediately, setting aside the question of whether he wants to or not. He might decide that he wants to get his hands on one of your kids so that he can go north after uniting the south. And if that child happens to be mine, carrying the blood of the Haans, then all the better."

"Ahh... Yeah, I could see that."

Fuuga's ambitions were grand, for better or for worse. With an end goal in sight, he'd run towards it heedless of any danger, not worrying that he might trip along the way. And if he tripped, he'd be able to accept he hadn't been up to the task. It was that lack of forethought that had driven Fuuga to become a great man.

"Maybe I should ask Tomoe to add me into the rotation... It'd be embarrassing for her to track my condition, but I can't be fussy..." Yuriga mumbled to herself.

I felt like I'd be stirring up trouble if I said anything, so I let her be. We'd have to have a family meeting about it when we got back.

I'm bringing back nothing but bad news, huh? I thought, clutching my head.

"Lord Souma. The wounded have been fully treated," Mao suddenly reported, completely unrelated to anything we'd been talking about.

She said it with all the cheer of a fully automatic water heater reporting that the bath was ready... Wait, the wounded?!

Snapping back to my senses, I cried out, "Right! What happened to Carla and the others?!"

"The treatment is complete. However, rapid recovery requires

stamina, so I would expect it to be a while longer before they wake up. I'll have them put in another room to rest."

"So they're okay then?! Thank goodness..."

As I leaned back in my chair, Yuriga put her hands on my shoulders to offer some extra support. It was at that moment that Juna entered the room and snapped off a tight, naval-style salute.

"Your Majesty, Grandmother's fleet has just arrived."

"They've made it, huh?"

If Excel had arrived, Castor would be with her. When I considered that I had narrowly dodged the bullet of having to show Castor his daughter floating around in a tank, maybe his timing was good. Still, Carla had almost died because of me, and she'd saved my life. I meant to accept any anger or resentment her father threw my way.

It'd feel better for me if he'd just haul off and punch me, but...if he really puts his full strength into it, I'd die, so hopefully he'll hold back. The worst thing would be if he wanted to complain but had to hold it in because I was his liege. Even if there was nothing I could have done about it.

Man, this is depressing...

I longed for one of Liscia's lectures.

Once Excel and Castor joined us, we were hurried over to the room where Carla was resting. Castor had already been informed of the situation. He'd gone pale for a moment when he first heard the details, but was relieved to hear she was being treated and her life wasn't at risk.

When I apologized for my decisions, all he had to say was, "No... If she was able to risk her life defending her liege, I don't think there could be any greater honor for someone born into a warrior family."

Still, he must have been worried. You could tell by how fast he was walking towards her sick room.

"Carla! Are you okay?!"

"F-Father?"

As Castor rushed into the room, Carla sat up in bed and stared blankly at us. She wasn't wearing her red armor now; instead, she was clad in a hospital gown like the ones they used in my old world.

Castor grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Are you okay?! D-Does it hurt anywhere?!"

"I, uh, my shoulders hurt where you're grabbing them."

"Oh! S-Sorry."

Castor hurriedly let go and Carla coughed awkwardly. Then she wrapped her arms around him.

"I'm okay. I feel exhausted all over, but nothing really hurts."

"Thank goodness..."

Castor fell to his knees, his relief sapping him of all energy. Despite putting on a strong face, he'd been worried sick.

Seeing him like this, Carla worriedly cried out, "F-Father?!"

When Castor had settled down, Excel walked over and said, "Carla... I'm so glad you were all right."

"Your Majesty! And Grandmother too!" Her eyes widened as she noticed us, and then she looked deeply relieved. "Thank goodness. You all made it through okay. I can't remember what happened after the giant shot me..."

"Yeah. You saved me, Carla. Really...I can't thank you enough."

"Your dedication saved many people. As your grandmother, I couldn't be more proud of you."

"N-No, you're giving me too much credit."

Carla frantically shook her head at what we were saying, but we hadn't exaggerated in the slightest. If she hadn't been there, I might have died, and if I'd died there, there probably wouldn't have been a truce with the Seadians. No one could possibly doubt that Carla's presence had had a major effect on the present.

"Also...I'm sorry." I bowed deeply to Carla. "My overly optimistic decisions caused casualties we could have avoided, and put your life in danger. I'm truly sorry."

"S-Sire, don't bow your head like that! I was the one who chose to put myself in harm's way for you!"

Carla waved her hand back and forth in a hurried denial before stopping and taking a deep breath.

"Besides," she continued, "I think I could have done better. I managed to protect you once, but I lost consciousness, and was unable to do anything else until the situation was over, even though Prince Cian was kind enough to warn us."

"So, about Cian... Was he the reason that you were able to react to defend me so quickly...?"

"Yes. When he said you wouldn't come back, I suspected something might happen."

Carla often looked after the children with Liscia and the others. My wives and I all had work that needed to be done and couldn't spend all our time on raising the children, so it was likely Carla had spent a longer time with them than any of us. Because of that, Carla had noticed Cian's apparent ability to predict near-future dangers, and ultimately she'd taken the warning more seriously than I had.

"Well, darn... I guess you and Cian saved me."

"It's kind of you to say that, but it was my duty to do so." Carla reached towards the slave collar that served as proof of her loyalty to the royal family. "Huh...?"

However, there was no collar there, bringing a confused look to

Carla's face.

"Ohh, if you're looking for your collar, it's gone. That thing doesn't come off until you die or are freed from slavery. But turning that around, it means it'll come off if you die... Your heart had completely stopped at one point. It must have come off then."

"I was in that much danger, was I?"

Confronted once more with how close she'd come to death, Carla went pale.

I smiled wryly and told her, "Ever since the incident with Mio, there's been room to reduce the sentences of the members of the House of Vargas who were just following the House of Carmine. I don't want to have to re-enslave you after you saved my life, so you can consider yourself freed."

"Oh, but...what about my role, stopping you if the time comes?"

"You can do that without being a slave, can't you? Ah, but if you want to rejoin the air force or be under Castor's command, I'll have to think about it."

"No," Carla shook her head, "I'm still concerned for Prince Cian and the others, so please let me continue to serve you at the castle. I have a long life ahead of me. Taking a little detour isn't a problem."

"Yeah. It'd be a big help to me and Liscia if you'd do that."

"Okay!"

Then Excel slapped her fan against her palm.

"Now then, sire. I hate to pour cold water on the harmonious atmosphere here, but... If Carla has awakened, then that means the other wounded should have finished being treated too. That included our soldiers...and the soldiers of the Great Tiger Empire."

"You're saying we have to return Fuuga's wounded to him, right?" I said, a serious look on my face, and Excel nodded.

"Yes. And we have to end the war with the demons... No, the Seadians."

"Right. Now that everyone knows the other side's situation, there's no point in continuing to fight the Seadians... It's going to be tough to make Fuuga understand that though."

"But if we don't, then this quagmire will continue."

"Yeah, I know... Madam Mao."

"You called?"

Mao suddenly appeared in front of us. Castor and Carla were dumbstruck, but Excel looked unperturbed thanks to a composure born of her many years.

"Madam Mao. Come to think of it, what is Madam Tiamat doing? I haven't seen her since the day we arrived."

"She's in my *core*, keeping an eye on me. To make sure I don't harm any of you."

“Did you need something, Sir Souma?” came a familiar voice.

“Whoa?!”

I doubled back in shock as Madam Tiamat suddenly appeared in front of us too.

Even knowing both of them could teleport, they appeared and disappeared so suddenly that I had to assume they might be doing it on purpose. Castor and Carla were both gaping, and the fan Excel was hiding her mouth with—possibly to mask her own surprise—was quivering.

“The entity viewed as the Demon Lord, and Mother Dragon of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, together in one room. Even I’m a little intimidated by a combination like that. The things you see when you live as long as I have...” Excel murmured.

Even though she said this, Lady Tiamat and Mao had lived for such eons that they probably looked at Excel as no more than a baby. She wouldn’t stand a chance against either of them.

Regardless, the Mother Dragon was here, so I decided to talk business.

“Madam Tiamat. It sounds like Fuuga’s men have been treated, so could you send them back to him?”

“Very well. Would you like it done immediately?”

“Oh, no. We’ll want to have one of the soldiers deliver a message to Fuuga, so it can wait until after that.”

Madam Tiamat nodded and then vanished. Considering her position, she probably couldn’t be seen taking our side.

Excel furrowed her brow. “If you’re sending a message, then I assume you’re planning to hold a meeting with Sir Fuuga?”

“Yeah. Like I said before, we need to find an ‘out’ for him. If he were to go wild here, it might close off the possibility of reconciling with the Seadians.”

The losses we took in this war were the result of him making decisions for me. We’re going to have to make our own choices from now on to avoid a repeat of that.

“He’s such a troublemaker.” Excel let out a little sigh. “Even with the door to the north closed, the world of the north is still swarming with monsters, yes? We don’t know when the door might open again, so his ambitions to dominate the south are nothing but a nuisance.”

“Yeah... But now that we’ve come into contact with Mao and her people, I can finally see a way to end Fuuga’s era and beat him.”

That made Excel’s eyes widen.

“Well, this is certainly unusual. You always rely on Sir Hakuya and me when it comes to tactics and strategy, so I wouldn’t have expected you to speak of victory like that.”

“Right. But this isn’t in the domain of tactics or strategy.”

This was something grander, yet more fundamental than either of those. If tactics and strategy were what let a great man survive in troubled times, then it was simply a matter of ending those troubles. We already had the key to triggering that sort of paradigm shift.

It'll still involve butting heads with Fuuga at least once though...

The thought of the potential casualties weighed on me, but...I'd have to think about that later. For now, I needed to resolve this current situation so that we could move on to the next stage.



Epilogue: Before the Inevitable Conflict

One day after the wounded were sent back to Fuuga...

Fuuga and I were having a broadcast meeting. First, I explained the key details of what had happened to him.

“...And that’s how it is.”

“You called a truce with the demons and closed the gate to another world... Yeah?”

“Seadians, not demons.”

We had gone into battle with the Seadians and taken considerable losses, but agreed to a cessation of hostilities when it became clear during the battle that each side was misunderstanding the other. After that, I held a meeting with Mao, the representative of the Seadians—who we had been calling Demon Lord Divalroi—and we exchanged information.

There I learned that the demons were in fact people from beyond the north sea called the Seadians, and they too were the victims of monster attacks. Mao and I then cooperated to close the gate the monsters were coming through. This would suppress the demon waves that had been occurring once a decade before now, but even with the gate closed, the scattered islands of Seadia were still overrun with monsters.

Who knew when the gate might open again and the monsters pour out? We had bought ourselves time, but the problem still needed to be solved.

I relayed all these things to him without a single lie. I did, however, conceal that the ones with the authority to control Mao and close the gate were me and any of my children. That information could only spark trouble. It would have also taken a while to explain how this world came to be, so I skipped over that detail too. I didn’t know if he’d understand, and even if he did, it would be hard for me to prove it.

“This ‘world’ of the north...the one you’re saying these Seadians came from, it’s beyond the north sea?” Fuuga asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s terra incognita on this world’s maps, right?”

“Sure is.”

“I hear that even if you head due north from the north of the continent, you’ll eventually get turned around and end up back where you came from. If this is hard for you to grasp, you can just think of it like there’s a barrier placed there by some spiritual entity. With it in place, no one could traverse between the worlds of the north and the south before now, but the gate opened a hole between them.”

“Hmm... Some parts of what you’re saying are hard to accept, but they did have those giant mechanical weapons. You came from another world too, so I guess I’m just gonna have to buy the idea that there’s another unknown world to the north. A dangerous world that still exists... Right?”

“You’ve got it. There’s no point in continuing the war with the Seadians. They’re like refugees that escaped from the world of the north. This war started because of ignorance and misunderstandings. I think we should reconcile now, and work together on addressing the problem posed by Seadians who came here.”

“And that’s why you agreed to a truce...?” Fuuga turned a harsh glance in my direction. “You think the people will accept that? Everyone on this continent believes there’s a demon lord in the Demon Lord’s Domain, who has demon servants and is controlling all the monsters. Do you think it’s that easy to lower our fist now that we’ve raised it?”

“They’ll need convincing, sure. But if we don’t slowly correct their misconceptions and reconcile, there’s going to be a war between the worlds. The northern world is unstable because it’s swarming with monsters. We can’t solve this without Mao and the Seadians’ help.”

“There were a lot of deaths on our side during this campaign. I’m grateful that they treated our wounded, but do you think that’s going to be enough to convince me that we should stop fighting?”

“We lost people, same as you, and one of my prized carriers got wrecked. If we don’t stop things here, the damage will get worse. The combined forces of mankind started this by invading in the first place, so we’re the ones in the wrong to begin with.”

“If I don’t at least have the demon lord’s head to show for all this, I don’t see how I’m going to satisfy my people, you get me?”

“You need a head to show for all this...?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Madam Mao, could you show yourself?”

I called for Mao as Fuuga gave me a dubious look.

In an instant, she appeared. Fuuga’s eyes widened at how sudden it was.

“Fuuga. This is DIVAlloid MAO. You can call her Madam Mao. The name Demon Lord Divalroi just came from people mishearing her

name.”

“That’s the, uh...Divalroi I’ve heard rumors about?”

“It’s *DIVAlroid*... Well, from our perspective, you can think of that as more like a name for her race, and Mao is her actual name. Do you think anyone’s going to be convinced if you lop her head off and show it around, saying you’ve slain the Demon Lord?”

Fuuga was at a loss for words.

Mao was an anthropomorphized reading software, and the simplest way to describe her appearance was that she was a cutesy girl. It was a far cry from how mankind had been imagining the Demon Lord all this time. If he brought back *her* severed head, people would question the great Fuuga’s sanity, and be really weirded out.

“Besides, there’s no way you could even put her severed head on display.”

I swung my arm as if to slap her on the back, but it simply slipped through her without any resistance. Fuuga’s eyes widened even more.

“Huh? What’s going on?”

“She only exists as a projection... You can think of her as something like a spirit or a ghost. The Seadians all worship her as their mother, much like people venerate Madam Tiamat in our world. You can’t take her head. It’s both physically and politically impossible.”

“That’s a problem... People want results.”

The look in his eyes was cold, but I shrugged.

“You’ve got results. By reconciling with the Seadians, we were able to close the gate to another world. Half of the reason we were able to make contact with Mao and her people was that you chose to heed the Seadians’ warnings. People will be free from the demon waves for a time thanks to you.”

“You’re saying I can take your credit?”

“I’m only stating the truth... I may resent how being dragged into this cost a lot of lives, but if you hadn’t raised your army we wouldn’t be here now with these results.”

“What will you do with the Seadians? Add them to the Maritime Alliance?”

“Well, I did consider that...”

If I did do that, I’d be stealing Fuuga’s glory and earning the enmity of those who supported him. After discussing the matter with Hakuya, we decided it was better not to.

“However, it’d be wise to instead have the Great Tiger Empire and Maritime Alliance both send observers, and we treat the Seadians as an independent faction. As I said, we’re absolutely going to need their cooperation in the future. This area has always been a desert wasteland with no inhabitants. We should accept them as immigrants

from the world of the north, and engage in trade and cultural exchange with them.”

“We escaped here while fighting the monsters, so we’re not prosperous, but we’ll help you clear out the remaining monsters in the northern regions of the continent,” Mao offered.

“Hrmm...” Fuuga grunted in response.

If he was going to stabilize the expanded Great Tiger Empire, the remaining monsters in the north were an obstacle to that. If the Seadians were saying they would fight the monsters, that shouldn’t have been a bad offer for Fuuga.

He turned a probing glance in my direction. “The Seadians only have one city, right? Wouldn’t it be faster to just take it and force them to submit?”

“If you do that, the Maritime Alliance will have no part in it. I hear you ran into a super weapon on your end too, but the steel giant that sunk our battleship with a single shot remains intact. You won’t be getting any more help from the Star Dragon Mountain Range and the Dragon Knight Kingdom either, so if you want to fight the Seadians on your own, have at it.”

“I won’t say we couldn’t win, but the cost would be exorbitant.” Fuuga seemed to think for a moment...and eventually nodded. “Fine. I’ll agree to a truce. But we’re going to have to get our story straight before we announce it to the people.”

He wanted to make sure neither side took credit for this.

“Okay... Let’s have Hakuya and Hashim hash out the details.”

“Yeah. By the way, Souma.”

“Hm? What?”

“Is the world of the north big?”

I looked over to Mao. She nodded, saying, “Yes. It lacks a major continent like this world and is made up entirely of islands, but if you include the seas as well, it’s the same size as the world of the south.”

“Hmm. Terra incognita, huh? Sounds interesting,” Fuuga said, a glint in his eye.

Well, it’s a new frontier, I guess. That was the kind of thing Fuuga would be into. It’d be perfect if his interests could shift from this continent to the world of the north, but...that wasn’t going to happen. His people wouldn’t let him set aside the path of dominance he had been walking all this time. They were going to demand an answer. The answer to the question: “How will the era of Fuuga come to an end?” Fuuga had to sense that too.

“Before going north, I need to bring together the *south* first,” Fuuga said with a pointed look in my direction.

Yeah, go figure, I thought. “You know, if you’d just take the path of cooperation, the south could come together the very next day.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! If I was the kind of guy who would take the easy route like that, we’d never have come this far. I’m just going to keep on racing forward while those who support me push me from behind. Will I unite the continent? Will I not? I think it’s time to find out what answer this era is going to give us.”

“““Hm?!””””

The looks on the faces of Aisha, Excel, and Castor, who were listening in by my side, grew stern.

Fuuga’s words suggested that the time had come to settle things with a direct confrontation between the Great Tiger Empire and the Maritime Alliance. It wouldn’t be long before Fuuga came to attack the Kingdom of Friedonia, no doubt. The result of that battle would decide not just our fates, but the fate of this world.

“If you plan to lay a hand on my home, expect to face retribution for it,” I said.

Fuuga blinked at me.

What?

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I didn’t expect you to basically say, ‘Come at me!’ You think you have that good a chance of winning, do you?” Fuuga said with a smile of pure amusement. “Sounds like fun. Let’s see what you’ve got in store for me.”

With those words, Fuuga cut the transmission.

“Whew...” I was sighing when Excel came over to me.

“Sire... He’ll be coming to attack us, won’t he?”

“With the problem of the Demon Lord’s Domain solved now, the Maritime Alliance is the only potential enemy he has left. Because I’m the leader of that, he and his people are going to want to settle things with me. If he can just defeat us, the continent will essentially be unified.”

“Uniting the continent is a feat no one in all our history has been able to accomplish.”

“Yeah. Which is why his blind followers will demand it of him.”

But here’s the thing, Fuuga. That’s a goal that’s viable because of the times we live in now, and it may well be seen as worthless in the era to come. You’re going to find that out the hard way.

I told Excel, “Fuuga will want to come at us fully prepared. But we don’t have a lot of time to spare. We need to hurry back to the Kingdom.”

“Yes, I agree.”

With that, we agreed on a speedy return home.



The next thing I knew, that black cube was in front of me...

There was a truce in place between the Maritime Alliance, Great

Tiger Empire, and the Seadians for the moment, and we would continue our dialogue going forward as we sought a path towards reconciliation. Whether the Seadians chose to stay on this continent or seek our help in returning to the northern hemisphere, we were going to need to build a new relationship between Landians and Seadians.

With the north technically now stabilized, we decided to immediately return to our own country. We needed to get home quickly and start preparing countermeasures against Fuuga, who was going to try following up liberating the Demon Lord's Domain by dominating the continent.

In order to launch a conquest of the south, Fuuga would need to get public sentiment on board. And if all he said was that they had taken care of the demons, so now it was time to invade the southern nations of mankind...well, that was bound to provoke war exhaustion and anti-war sentiment. We had to use what little time we had here to prepare.

Just as we were about to head home, Mao called on me to speak to her alone. Her appearance as the DIVAlloid MAO was just an interface for communication, while that black cube was apparently her main body.

Mao, Tiamat, and I were alone together, standing in front of the cube.

"I have something to give you, Lord Souma. Please stick out your hands." Mao cupped her hands, like you would when scooping up water, and extended them towards me.

"Huh...? Uh, sure."

I did as she asked, extending my cupped hands towards Mao. When I did, she gently placed something in them. It was a red magatama about the size of my palm. The comma-shaped jewel looked pretty big, but wasn't that heavy. The surface shone a little, the shimmering looking like flames or perhaps pulsing blood.

"What is this?"

"A show of my gratitude, and the least that I could give you as a parting gift when you go to face a storm," Mao said, her expression serious. She pointed at the magatama in my hands. "It contains a record of your biological data which I collected earlier. In the world that was, we would have been able to use it to reconstruct your body, or even the body of an ancestor dozens of generations removed. I've also modeled it after an accessory from your home country."

"I don't understand... You're, uh, scaring me here."

With the right technology, I could be cloned? Did people in the future go that far? As someone who didn't understand the tech or the ethics involved, I didn't know what I was supposed to do with what she'd just given me.

“Please tell me you’re not planning to make another ‘me’ who can fix any more of your future errors. I’d really rather you didn’t,” I said.

“Have no fear. I wouldn’t be able to give administrative privileges to a reconstructed entity like that.”

Is that something I should feel relieved about? I thought. “Then why give this to me? How am I supposed to use it?”

“We’ve heard how you came to this world with nothing,” Madam Tiamat said in a calm voice, speaking on Mao’s behalf. “You were suddenly cut from your former world by the actions of this world’s people. That summoning system was designed to find an appropriate person from a group of isolated individuals with no family, but you still had parents and grandparents at one point. We feel sorry for you, not being able to bring anything that showed your ties to them to this world.”

“Madam Tiamat...”

“But your body was given to you by your parents,” Mao continued. “Even if your cells are being replaced day by day, your body still contains a record you inherited from your parents and grandparents. This can extract that, putting it into a form you can see.”

Her explanation let me understand what this magatama was for.

“This is...supposed to serve like a mortuary tablet, since I couldn’t bring my family’s, huh?”

I’d left our house, our family altar, and their graves in my former world. If this was the distant future, nothing would remain of them by now. I’d wished I could have at least brought their mortuary tablets many times before now. *Okay... So this magatama has a record of Grandpa and the others inside it.*

I pocketed the magatama.

“Thanks, I’ll be glad to take it. Maybe I should set up a home shrine in Parnam and decorate it with this.”

I didn’t want to let the mood get too heavy, so I kept my tone cheerful.

Mao and Madam Tiamat both smiled and nodded.

“In our position, we aren’t allowed to interfere with the decisions made by the people of this world. Though we know that you and your country are about to be caught up in a conflict, we can’t extend a helping hand.”

“So, at the very least, we will be praying for you and yours to stay safe.”

That meant neither the Star Dragon Mountain Range nor the Seadians could get involved in our battle with Fuuga.

That said, if they did, it was pretty clear we’d be accused of “siding with the demons against mankind,” or “suppressing faiths

other than Mother Dragon Worship,” which would make managing our internal affairs difficult. I needed God and the devil to sit this one out. Mankind had to sort out its own problems.

“I understand. Me and my friends and family will handle it somehow.”

Mao and Madam Tiamat smiled.

““May good fortune go with you.””

As I was listening to those words, I suddenly blacked out.



“Huh?! Your Majesty!”

“Whoa! Your Majesty?! Are you okay?!”

When I came to my senses, I was aboard the *Albert II*, being supported by Juna and Aisha. It seemed I’d been teleported here by Mao or Madam Tiamat’s power. I’d apparently stumbled over when I suddenly appeared, and my wives had rushed to catch me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Nothing to worry about,” I said as I stood on my own feet, then Excel walked over.

“Did you say your goodbyes?”

“Yeah. I got an unexpected souvenir too,” I replied casually, and Excel covered her mouth with her fan as she smiled.

“Hee hee! You did, did you? Okay, Your Majesty, your fleet is ready and waiting.”

“All right, how about we get headed back home.”

“Understood.”

Once I said the word, Excel gave the signal, and the combined fleets of the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Kingdom headed back to their respective countries. When we moved away from shore, we saw Seadians standing on the rocks, waving to us as we left.

Was the elderly kobold who had saved Tomoe with them? The man who’d saved our beloved little sister. Things were so hectic that I only heard the story. I never met him myself, but I wanted to thank him in person. And to that end...if I wanted to meet the Seadians again one day with a smile, I needed to make sure all our preparations for the war were perfect.



Some days later...

We left the fleet with Excel in Lagoon City and flew home to Parnam Castle with Naden.

“Waaah! Waaah!”

“H-Hey, Cian!”

The first thing that greeted us when we arrived home was an attack by my son Cian. With tears in his eyes, he was punching my leg. It didn't hurt in the slightest with him only being six years old, but his desperation stunned all of us. Liscia looked troubled as he ignored her attempts to get him to stop, while the usually rambunctious Kazuha was hiding behind her mother, also with tears in her eyes.

Aisha, Juna, Naden, Tomoe, and Carla, who had all come home with me, were looking on, wide-eyed. Cian was usually so withdrawn and patient, and held in his anger even when his tomboyish little sister ran him ragged or got him hurt.

"Wh-What's the matter, Cian? Why are you hitting me?" I asked, confused, and Cian looked up at me with teary eyes.

"Waaah... Carla got hurt... I might never have seen her again... I said it was dangerous... I *told* you it was dangerous, Father... *Hic*..."

"Huh?! This is about me?!" Carla said, eyes wide with surprise.

Oh, that makes sense... He's upset that Carla could have died, huh? He was still just a kid, so he probably didn't understand the situation out there. Just...that someone he cared about got hurt, and he was mad about it. That was immature, but at the same time...it was a very proper, very human reaction.

"I see, Cian... You're scolding me, huh?"

I knelt down and hugged my son. Cian sniffled again and hugged me back, his arms tightening around my neck. And before I knew it...I was crying.

Carla had been fortunate enough to survive, but others didn't make it. The families of the fallen must have felt the same way as Cian. They just didn't have the chance to vent their anger. It was my fault... Those losses happened because I'd let Fuuga take the lead.

"Fortuna is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but she still leaves us to direct the other half by human virtù."

Those were Machiavelli's words, which I had repeated to myself time and again.

I'm not going to make the same mistake again... Fuuga, you're not going to get your way anymore. I'm going to end your era... Personally.

I swore that to myself as I hugged Cian tight.



Afterword

Thank you for buying Volume 17 of *Realist Hero*. It's Dojyomaru.

This volume is about the Demon Lord's Domain and how this world came to be.

When I first started writing this story, I thought about how to come up with a reason for all the elements of the world that I was glossing over with "it's a gamelike world." If it's a world of swords and sorcery, with a variety of races, existing in reality outside the game...what situation could result in that? What I came up with was an abandoned test site. A world where nanomachines would allow the creation of magic-like effects, and various races were created, abandoned, and their purpose forgotten. My ideas about this were influenced by Fujiko F. Fujio's short story *Rounenki no Owari* (Old Age's End).

I thought a situation like the one I've described in the main story of *Realist* might result in a gamelike world. But to think it would take seventeen volumes of buildup to get there... You can see how important the ability to gloss over important information is because of a shared understanding of how things work in the default setting. In our current society, where we're expected to interface with a lot of entertainment quickly, those sorts of default settings have reached their peak.

Now, I'd like to thank my readers, and everyone involved with this book.



Extra Story: The Prickly Girl Wants to Be Spoiled Too

It was a little after Souma and his group returned from the Demon Lord's Domain to the Kingdom.

Around this time, the two countries were sorting out how they were going to announce the complete liberation of the Demon Lord's Domain as the result of a joint operation between the Kingdom of Friedonia and the Great Tiger Empire. Even with the calamity passed, there was the shadow of a new battle on the horizon—but the continent was at peace for the time being.

A group of five friends from their days at the Royal Academy gathered for the first time in a while...

"Okay, Ichiha. Say 'Ahh.'"

"A-Ahh."

Tomoe offered a spoonful of pudding to Ichiha, who hesitantly ate it. Tomoe was beaming, and Ichiha didn't seem to mind the gesture. It was Yuriga, Lucy, and Velza who looked like they were going to be sick at this sugary-sweet display of affection. They were at the parlor run by Lucy's family enjoying a spot of tea. Their paths had parted ways after graduation, so it had been hard to get the whole gang back together since.

"Look, Ichiha. This éclair is tasty too."

"No, it's clearly too big for—mmph!"

Ichiha got his cheeks stuffed full of éclair.

"Hey, cut it out, you two!" Yuriga shouted, unable to take any more of this. "Do that when you're on your own! Think how I feel, having to watch that lovey-dovey nonsense!"

"Aww. But we're engaged, you know?" Tomoe said with a chuckle, earning wry smiles from Lucy and Velza.

"So you're one of *those*, Tomie. You'll act as sweet as ya think ya can get away with, is that it? Ya musta had a lotta stress built up durin' the time it took you two to finally get together, huh?"

"It was a long, long courtship, after all. Ichiha, do try to accept all of her love."

"Gulp... Ah ha ha... Okay."

Ichiha swallowed his eclair and then nodded with a troubled laugh. But Yuriga was having none of it.

“That doesn’t mean you can just do this stuff anywhere! Consider who’s watching...”

“Oh, Ichiha. There’s a little cream on your cheek.”

“Hey, listen to me!”

Tomoe put her hands on the table and leaned in, paying no mind whatsoever to Yuriga’s complaints. Then, putting one hand on the opposite cheek, she brought her face up close and...

“Mmm.” (*Slurp!*)

“Whah?!”

“T-Tomoe?!”

She stuck her little tongue out and licked the cream off his cheek. Lucy and Velza were both blushing.

“Wow! Ya sure are forward, Tomie.”

“I think it’s lovely... Maybe I’ll try it myself with Hal.”

As for Yuriga, her brain seemed to pause for a moment, then she came to her senses and got really mad.

“I told you to consider where you are! Look, you’ve got Ichiha freezing up!”

“Heh heh, you jealous, Yuriga?”

“No one said I was!”

“Well, if you’re jealous, why don’t you go flirt with Big Brother?”

“...!”

When Tomoe said that, Yuriga imagined doing what she had just witnessed with Souma, and her face suddenly turned red.

Tomoe smirked. “He’s your *husband*, after all. Why not let him spoil you?”

“Sh-Shut up! You’re such a little brat!”

“Little? I’m about the same height as you now, actually.”

“Shut up! Shut! Up! I’m going home!”

Yuriga rose from her seat and indignantly stormed off back to the castle. Ichiha sighed when he saw the grin on Tomoe’s face as she watched her go.

“Tomoe... Was that intentional?”

“Hey, if I didn’t do something, they were never going to make any progress.” Tomoe shrugged, not trying to deny it. “It’s a political marriage, and Yuriga’s in a delicate position. Both she and Big Brother tend to hold back a little too much. They’re married, so don’t you think having a relationship like that’s a little...sad? Big Brother is supposed to be the closest person to her, and she ought to be able to let him spoil her.”

“Oh, so that’s why you were getting her all fired up,” Velza said, sounding impressed.

“That’s why they made you their chamberlain, huh? You’re always thinkin’ about how to help the royals get along.” Lucy agreed.

Tomoe chuckled to herself. “Well, it was half because I wanted to show off how in love Ichiha and I are.”

What a little devil!

The three of them shuddered at Tomoe’s hidden potential.



That night, I was in the governmental affairs office, working on some simple documents that were too minor to bother putting off until tomorrow, when there came a timid knock at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

Yuriga entered, and she was hanging her head and playing with her hands.

“What’s up, Yuriga?”

“Nothing... It’s no big deal, I don’t really need anything, but...”

For having no business here, she sure wasn’t in any hurry to leave. She just stood there, fidgeting awkwardly. I thought it was strange, but when I turned back to my paperwork...

“P-Pardon me.”

Suddenly, Yuriga climbed up to sit on my lap. Yuriga might not have been as small as Naden, but she was still petite, so she fit there neatly. The wings growing out of her back brushed my arms and it really tickled. *Huh? What’s going on here?*

“Um, I’m still trying to get some work done.”

“Am I in the way...?” Yuriga asked, turning her head to look at me with upturned eyes. It was kinda cute.

“Nah... You’re light, so it’s not that hard to work around you.”

“Okay... Let me stay like this for a bit then. You’re my husband, so it’s fine, right?”

“Uhh, okay. Sure.”

She was like a kitten, nibbling at you when it wanted something.
Does she feel the need to be spoiled today?

I continued working at my desk with Yuriga on my lap for a while.



Bonus Short Stories

The C Clan

One day, I was in the governmental affairs office planning an event to promote the economy with Roroa.

“Souma, Roroa, do you have a moment?” came a voice.

“Julius?”

“Bro?”

Julius, Roroa’s elder brother who had become my White General, dropped in on us.

“What’s up? Got a problem with the military or somethin’?” Roroa asked.

“No, it’s nothing that important.”

“Ya get in a fight with Big Sis Tia, then? Did she run out on you?”

“How rude. We get along swimmingly as a couple.”

“Yeah, I can’t see your little missus doin’ that anyway.”

“I’m more worried about you,” Julius said. “I pray your tendency to come out and say things like that doesn’t make your husband come to hate you.”

“Oh, yeah? If it’s a fight you’re here lookin’ for, I’ll give ya one at a discount.”

Watching the two siblings banter, I thought about how much better they were getting along now. They had been political opponents at one point, but now looked like any other brother and sister pair you might meet.

Feeling a little left out, I smiled wryly as I asked Julius, “So, Julius, what *did* you come here for?”

“Oh, right.” Julius returned to his senses and looked at me. “I wanted to talk to you about my good friend Colbert.”

“Hm? What’s this about Mr. Colbert?” Roroa asked, cocking her head to the side.

“You know Colbert will be marrying Madam Mio of the House of Carmine on the same day as Souma and Madam Maria’s wedding, right?”

“Yeah. They’re participatin’ in the mass wedding event. And?”

“That means he’ll be a member of the House of Carmine from here on. His first name is Gatsby, so that would make him Gatsby Carmine.”

“I see... We won’t be able to call him Colbert anymore, huh?” I

mused.

Colbert's full name was Gatsby Colbert, and Roroa and I both called him Colbert because we found it easier to pronounce. But he would be marrying into the House of Carmine soon, which would mean he wasn't a Colbert any longer.

"That's...kinda sad, huh?" Roroa murmured.

Colbert had been like a second brother to Roroa. Even when she was on poor terms with her real brother, Colbert had been with her as part of the Ministry of Finance.

"He's always been Mr. Colbert to me, so not bein' able to call him that is gonna make it feel he's become a whole different person."

Roroa began scratching her cheek with a troubled smile.

Was it like having a sibling's last name change all of a sudden after they got married? I was a single child, so it was hard to put myself in her shoes, but...I could sympathize a little, at least.

"So, I had an idea," Julius said, broaching the subject. "Could you let Colbert keep his family name as a middle name? I'm aware that the Carmine name has historical and political significance to this country, but... For my part, I'd like to be able to keep calling him Colbert."

"Darlin', I'd like you to let him too," Roroa agreed, turning an expectant look towards me.

"I see. Gatsby C. Carmine, huh?" I thought for a moment, crossing my arms, then quickly nodded. "Sounds good to me. It'd feel weird to me having to call him Gatsby or Carmine at this point too."

"But won't there be people concerned about what to call him?" Julius asked, but I just shrugged.

"That's nothing new. I went from Souma Kazuya to Souma A. Elfrieden, and soon I'll be Souma E. Friedonia. Where did my first name, Kazuya, go?"

"That's your fault for messin' up at the start, darlin'," Roroa said with a slightly exasperated tone.

"It is?" asked Julius.

"Sure is," she replied.

I loudly cleared my throat. "You've got the same sort of problem, don't you? Julius *Lastania*."

"Yes, I suppose I do..." Julius said, it being his turn to shrug now. "I can't very well change my name to Julius A. Lastania now. I wouldn't want to make Tia and my son Tius bear the burdens of the Amidonia name."

"Hold up, Bro? I'm the one havin' to bear those burdens, y'know?"

"You snatched them away from me, so you'll have to take responsibility for that."

"Ugh... I wanna give 'em all back to you, with interest."

The two of them started going at it again. They really did get

along better now...

“Anyway, Colbert doesn’t want to give up his name, and Mio isn’t demanding he let go of it, right? In that case, I’ve decided to have him keep it.”

“Yeah!”

“I’ll inform Colbert and Madam Mio.”

And so, the name Gatsby C. Colbert was born.

Poncho Comes Home

In the noble quarter of Parnam, many properties had once belonged to the corrupt nobles Souma punished. These properties had since been given to Souma’s newly hired military or civil officials (instead of the old guard, who didn’t want them because of how they came to be uninhabited) or were used to house foreign guests. Poncho’s mansion was one such case.

“Whew, I’m finally home, yes.”

Having returned from a trip to the Spirit Kingdom and made his report to Souma, Poncho was finally able to make it home in the evening.

“I wonder how everyone’s been getting on without me, yes.”

Poncho was greeted by the mansion’s servants, who were largely managed by Serina, as he passed through the gate, then went and opened the front door. Two little figures leapt at Poncho the moment he did.

““Father! Welcome home!””

His usual, more rotund build would have absorbed the impact, but he was currently slimmed down due to both Serina and Komain demanding another child from him, so he felt the blow hitting his internal organs directly.

“Gwugh...! I-I’m home, Marin, Maron.” Poncho gagged a little before recovering enough to pat his two five-year-old girls on the head.

Marin was the daughter he’d had with his first wife, Serina, and Maron with his second wife, Komain. They looked like twins, both pudgy in the same way their father was, but Maron’s skin had a slight reddish tinge, which made it easy to distinguish them.

“Hey, hey, you went to that place called Abroad, right?”

“Did you bring back gifts? Are there any sweets?”

The girls were begging for food the moment he returned. Oh, yes, Poncho could have absolutely no doubt that these were his children with Serina and Komain.

As he returned their embrace, Poncho said, “I did bring back something for you, but I’d like to see your mothers first, yes.”

The twins looked at one another.

“Father kissed our mommies goodbye!”

“Now he’s going to kiss our mommies hello!”

“D-Don’t say that so loudly, yes.”

Poncho was intimidated seeing his daughters be so direct about it. The servants who were watching from a distance all chuckled.

Then, two women came down the stairs.

“Welcome home.”

“Welcome home, Poncho.”

It was Poncho’s wives, Serina and Komain.

They were in the clothes they were used to wearing at home, a maid outfit and a traditional ethnic costume. Marin and Maron, who were hugging Poncho, each cried, “Mommy!” before jumping off of their father and rushing over to their respective mothers. They both lovingly patted their daughters on the head.

“Marin, did you greet your father properly?”

“I did! I said, ‘Father! Welcome home!’”

“And you, Maron? Did you greet him too?”

“I did! He said he brought gifts too!”

The mothers both smiled wryly at their daughters’ boisterous smiles.

Poncho walked over to the four of them at a relaxed pace.

“I’m home, yes. Serina, Komain, did I miss anything while I was away, yes?”

“Nothing all that important... If I were to reach for something to tell you, it would be that we were, perhaps, a little lonely? Both at the absence of our husband and the resulting decline in the number of dishes on the table,” Serina said without a hint of guilt, bringing a wry smile to Komain’s face.

“We don’t get to try your experimental dishes when you’re not around, after all. It’s so like Serina, mixing love with hunger... I can never tell which of the two is greater; her love for you or her appetite for the food you cook.”

“Are you not the same, Komain? Marin and Maron would never have been born if we weren’t like this.”

“Ah ha ha... I suppose not.”

Poncho felt a warm, fuzzy feeling in his heart as he watched them. Back when he first entered Souma’s service, he could never have imagined that one day his wives and daughters would welcome him home like this. He savored the happiness as he set down his bag.

“Now then, I’ve brought back bean tea and spices from the Spirit Kingdom, and I’m going to use them to fix up a delicious meal for all of us, yes.”

““Yay!””

Marin and Maron raised their arms and jumped into the air when they heard there was going to be good food. Unable to wait, they picked up his bag and rushed off to the kitchen with it. When they were gone, Serina and Komain subtly approached Poncho, planting a kiss on each of his cheeks, then whispered in his ears.

“Darling, we’ve had a break because of your trip, but let’s get back to work tonight.”

“Marin and Maron have been pestering us for a little brother or sister, and we need to do our best for them.”

Hearing this, Poncho knew he wouldn’t be able to gain back his weight for the foreseeable future.

Watching Smart People Talk Is Nerve-racking

In the gardens of Castle Valois, in the city of Valois—which had just recently changed from being an imperial capital to a royal capital—Queen Jeanne and her royal consort, Hakuya, were having tea with Excel Walter, who had been sent from the Kingdom of Friedonia to help instruct their fleet. This break was something Hakuya had suggested to give Jeanne some relief from her heavy workload.

“Oh? Were you ever this considerate to His Majesty?” Excel asked, chuckling, her mouth hidden behind her fan.

Hakuya shrugged. “His Majesty had many around him like the indulgent Lady Juna and the adoring Lady Aisha to help him recover. Lady Liscia was always there, monitoring his mental well-being too, so I never felt the need to say anything.”

“Heh heh, I suppose so. And that’s why you act so sweet to Madam Jeanne?”

“I believe it’s only natural that a husband should indulge his wife.”

“You sure know how to make an argument...” Excel said, letting out a sigh that was half exasperated, half impressed.

Then, looking from Jeanne’s face to Hakuya’s, she snapped her fan shut.

“I see. Madam Jeanne has worked outside as a military officer, while Sir Hakuya defended her inside as a civil official. It seems the Vargas household has stayed peaceful because my daughter keeps Castor under her thumb, but I see that you two have the opposite sort of arrangement.”

“What? Sir Hakuya has me under his thumb?” Jeanne blinked, earning a chuckle from Excel.

“It’s about distribution of roles. Things tend to work out much better if the reliable partner keeps a hold of the more active partner’s reins. It’s the same with Madam Mio and Sir Colbert of the House of

Carmine who'll be marrying soon. Sir Colbert does a good job of supporting her. If the reliable partner doesn't have a hold of the reins though, you end up with Madam Genia and poor Sir Ludwin, who's going to develop an ulcer from all the stress she causes him."

Alas, that's just life for them at this point, Excel thought, a cool look on her face as she sipped her black tea. Then, she smiled at Jeanne.

"It's nothing for you to worry about. Be yourself, and do all you can. It's the duty of the Black-Robed Royal Consort to manage things appropriately for you."

"I sense the many long years of wisdom behind those words," Hakuya said with a smile that seemed plastered onto his face.

Excel returned an identical grin, saying, "Oh, my, I suppose it was much too soon to talk about this with a little boy who's only an adult in terms of his height."

"Ha ha ha."

"Hee hee hee."

Sparks flew between them.

They were both sharp, and just bantering in a way they expected they could get away with, but Jeanne was beside herself with worry watching them.

"S-So, how are things with our fleet, Duchess Walter?" she asked, trying to change the topic.

Setting her teacup down, Excel replied, "Well...I can tell you, without any undue flattery, that this country's fleet is first-rate. Even if you don't have wonder weapons like the island carriers, you have more than enough of each type of ship, and they're well serviced and maintained. With such a large fleet, it's a mystery to me why the Empire never expanded out to sea."

"It seems past emperors were focused on expanding our terrestrial holdings. Dominating the seas remained a second priority," Hakuya explained with a serious look on his face. "The fleet was apparently built with the then Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union in mind, but only to clamp down on their piracy."

"And Sister had her hands full with the monsters on land too..." Jeanne added.

"Yes, I suppose she did," Excel replied with a nod. "However, it's your time now, and your fleet will be one of the driving forces in this new era."

"Duchess Walter... Yes! I think you're right!" Jeanne responded, full of energy.

Nodding with satisfaction, Excel said, "Oh, I know," and clapped her hands together. "Now that I think of it, I brought some tea with me from the Kingdom. Since we're already indulging, perhaps you would like to..."

“Hold on,” Hakuya interrupted, stopping Excel before she could have the servants prepare it.

Then, with a smile plastered on his face, he turned to Excel.

“This tea wouldn’t happen to have *something* in it, would it? I know that you’ve gotten all sorts of information out of King Souma with his wives’ permission, you realize?”

“My, you’re so perceptive. And here I was hoping to prepare some educational materials for Madam Jeanne.”

“Huh? Me?! What are you talking about?!” Jeanne blinked in confusion.

Smiling, Hakuya said, “Save that for His Majesty.”

“A fine piece of work you are, offering up His Majesty like that.”

“I’m honored to receive such a compliment from the venerable Duchess Walter.”

“Hee hee hee.”

“Ha ha ha.”

They each confronted the other with a smile again.

At the end of the day, Jeanne had spent the whole time on edge.

Hal and Velza’s Relationship

“Hey, Velza, are you sure this is where you wanted to go?”

This was the fruit parlor managed by Lucy’s family, the Evans Company. Velza was sitting across from Halbert, in a seat on the second-floor terrace.

“Given we’re celebrating your first day of work and all, I’d have gladly taken you somewhere more expensive, you know?”

“No. This place is where I wanted to come, Lord Hal,” Velza answered with alacrity.

Today, Velza had reached the age of majority and formally came to serve at the House of Magna, so they were here to celebrate the occasion. With permission from Halbert’s wives, Kaede and Ruby, of course.

“This is actually where Ichiha proposed to Tomoe. They’ve been coming since they got married to flirt with each other too. That’s why I wanted to come here with you, Lord Hal,” she said with a smile.

“O-Oh, yeah?” Halbert’s heart skipped a beat, seeing her beaming face. When she looked at him this way, it forced him to see her as a girl, like it or not.

They were both in civilian clothes today. Velza looked quite handsome in her uniform, and the women in the military were fangirling over her all the time. But with the short pants she was wearing now to show off her healthy legs and just a little makeup, she came off as a pretty, if somewhat boyish, girl.

“Thank you for waiting.”

The waitress came over carrying their food. Velza had ordered a parfait, while Halbert had ordered coffee. The coffee was a recent import from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, and Halbert had taken a liking to its aroma.

“Now, please, take your time and enjoy yourselves,” the waitress said before leaving.

Velza immediately took a spoonful of parfait, her cheeks melting into a grin.

“Mmm!”

Despite her usual cool demeanor, when she was eating sweets or in front of Halbert, her expression turned into something more like what you’d expect from a girl of her age. Halbert smiled wryly as he watched her.

“Ah ha ha... You’re making that look pretty delicious.”

“Sweet things have all the happiness of this world packed into them.”

With that said, Velza scooped up some of the cream and pudding from her parfait, offering it to Halbert as if she were going to say, “Say ahh.”

Halbert froze up when he saw that.

“Um...Velza?”

“Lady Tomoe was doing this with Ichiha, so I thought I’d try it myself.”

“Uh, you’re supposed to do that kind of thing with the guy you like...”

“Yes, which is why *I’m* doing it,” Velza replied, leaving no room for doubt as she pushed the spoon closer. Her eyes were fixed on Halbert.

Relenting under her gaze, Halbert accepted the proffered spoonful, chewing it with a wry smile on his face.

“To think you liked me so much...”

“Had you not noticed? I thought I’d made it pretty clear.”

“Well, yeah, I’d noticed. I mean, you’ve been working to box me in and cut off all avenues of escape.”

Halbert leaned back in his seat with a sigh.

“Kaede and Ruby are always telling me I need to treat you like a girl, not a little sister or something like that, and my folks are already treating you like a member of the family. Then there’s your father, Sur, constantly calling me your groom-to-be. At this point, I’ve already accepted that you have every intention of marrying me.”

“It took a lot of work, if I dare say so myself,” Velza said, puffing her chest up with pride. Halbert found that a little cute.

“I was kind of expecting you to cool off on the idea eventually...”

“We dark elf women are a passionate bunch. My love for you will never cool.”

“I get that from watching Madam Aisha, but...I’m human, you know? We live on different time scales.”

“You say that, yet you’ve already married Ruby, Lord Hal?”

“Well...you’ve got a point there.”

“It’s okay. We long-lived races know what we’re getting ourselves into,” Velza said, chuckling. “In fact, if we leave you short-lived people alone, you vanish in no time. That’s why I want to treasure the precious moments that we do have together.”

“Oh, yeah? Guess that’s one way of looking at it.” Halbert scratched his head shyly. “I’m blessed to have someone who cares so much about me.”

“Well, you have Kaede and Ruby too, so consider yourself thrice-blessed.”

“Ha ha ha. It seems almost excessive.”

“Yes. So...” Velza placed her hands over Halbert’s which had been resting on the table. “Live as long as you can, and let’s make lots of happy memories together. You saved a girl from the sand and dirt, and made her go weak in the knees for you, so please take responsibility for your actions, okay?”

The coffee tasted sweet as Velza smiled at him.

A Request for Shabon

A little while after a solution had been found to the problem of the Demon Lord’s Domain, Nine-Headed Dragon Queen Shabon and her partner Kishun visited Parnam.

They were publicly announcing it as a courtesy visit in recognition of the liberation of the Demon Lord’s Domain, but the main reasons were more practical. We all were going to discuss how to handle Fuuga, and also negotiate trade. That said, our countries were on good terms, and another goal of the trip was to introduce my son Cian to his fiancée, Shabon’s daughter, Princess Sharan.

“Look, Sharan! Over here! Over here!”

“Ahh! Wait for me, Big Sis Kazu.”

The children were playing noisily in my father-in-law Albert’s garden in the castle.

“It’s dangerous to run like that, you two,” Cian called after his playmates.

“Ahh, you too, Lord Cian! And Lady Kazuha, don’t pull her around like that!”

It looked like my daughter, Kazuha, had taken a liking to Princess Sharan. Kazuha was pulling her around by the hand as Cian toddled

after them, worried. Carla, the maid, watched over them, constantly on edge.

"Hee hee, the children certainly are energetic," Shabon said, stroking the head of her second child, Prince Sharon, who was sleeping on her lap. Liscia and I were with Shabon and Kishun in the gazebo, sipping tea as we took a break.

"Too much energy can be a problem though. Especially with Kazuha," Liscia said with a sigh. I could only smile wryly at that.

"She sure does take after you, huh?" I said.

"Hold on, what's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Just what it sounds like, actually."

"The two of you get along as well as ever, I see," Shabon said, chuckling at us. "I am envious."

"You say that, but you and Kishun must be getting along pretty well yourselves," I countered. "I mean, you've popped out two babies already."

"Yeah. And it wasn't twins like it was for me," Liscia agreed.

"Why yes," Shabon replied with a smile. "I do believe we are your equals when it comes to how well we can get along. Right, Kishun?"

"It's an honor to have you say that..." Kishun replied awkwardly.

For Kishun, Shabon wasn't just his wife, she'd also been his princess, so the combined feelings of love and loyalty made it hard for him to ever disagree with her. I could relate...

Shabon set her teacup down with a slight *clatter*.

"So, what is this favor you wanted to ask of me?" Her expression grew a little sterner as she spoke. "If it involves the Great Tiger Empire again, is it a favor that you would be asking of my country?"

"Oh, no, no, this isn't anything so heavy," I said, hurriedly correcting the misconception. "There's something I want to order from your craftsmen for my personal use."

"For...your personal use?"

"Yeah, this is it here," I said, producing a rough design I had drawn up.

"Is this a house... No, a shrine, perhaps?"

"Yeah, I knew you'd have designs like this in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago."

"What's this about, Souma?" Liscia asked.

I pointed to the designs and said, "This is something from my old world, modeled after the shrines where people in my country prayed to the kami. The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago's culture is similar to my home country's in many ways, so I figured they would have buildings like this there."

"I see. And your request is to have them build this for you?" Shabon asked, head inclined to one side.

“No, no,” I shook my head. “I want a small one. A miniature. It should be about the right size to hold this magatama.”

I set the comma-shaped jewel, which shone with a dull red light, on the table. Liscia looked closely at it.

“This thing... You got it from the Demon Lord... I mean Mao, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s like a mortuary tablet for all my ancestors. This design I have is for a kind of house shrine called a ‘kamidana,’ where you can pray to the kami at home. I was hoping to put the magatama in one so I could pay my respects to it there.”

“Oh! We do have a similar tradition in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago.”

“There are these little stone shrines by the side of the road, and we pray to the local gods of each island at them.”

Shabon and Kishun both nodded, seeming to have figured it out. If they were wayside shrines, then were they for gods that watch over travelers, maybe? Yeah, the tradition really did seem similar.

I offered the designs to Shabon.

“I’d like it made without nails, if possible. Do you think they can do that?”

“Well, I should think so... Our country’s craftsmen are excellent, after all.” Shabon took the plans and rolled them up. “But this certainly is unexpected. I never took you for the religious type, Sir Souma.”

“Yeah, I mean, you rejected becoming the Holy King, so I assumed you weren’t interested in divine authority,” Liscia said, agreeing with Shabon.

“Well, I’m not *deeply* religious, no, but I’m not an atheist either. In my old country, faith was something a little personal, integrated into our daily lives.”

“What do you mean?”

“We didn’t go to church and pray to God, but would think things like, ‘The sun god is watching me, so I can’t do anything evil,’ or ‘This is an affront to my ancestors.’ Oh, and also, ‘You have to take care of your things, because everything has a soul inside of it.’ Those thoughts could be seen as sun worship, ancestor worship, and animism, right?”

“Ami... Ani... Uh, I think I kind of get it, aside from that last one that started with A.”

I smiled wryly at the look on Liscia’s face as she struggled to understand.

Picking the red magatama, I held it up to the light. “It’s nothing complicated. It’s just that imagining Grandma and Grandpa are watching over me through this magatama makes me feel a little better.”

“Hee hee, I think that is a wonderful thought,” Shabon said with a smile. “We will set about construction with all the respect such a project deserves. This is a house for the ancestors of Sharan’s future partner, so it will need to be a splendid one.”

“Thank you, Shabon.”

I felt like this request was going to help strengthen the bond between our countries.

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by Dojyomaru

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